

**Accomplishmen
ts of the Duke's
Daughter Vol. 1**

Reia

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Accomplishments *of the* Duke's Daughter

NOVEL

1

Written by **Reia**
Illus. **Haduki Futaba**



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WRITTEN BY

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ILLUSTRATED BY

Haduki Futaba



Seven Seas Entertainment



EDWARD TONE TASMERIA

Second prince of the Tasmerian Kingdom. Was engaged to Iris.



YURI NEUER

Daughter of Baron Neuer. Has built a reverse harem at the academy.



BERNE DARSHI ARMELIA

The Duke of Armelia's son. Has a crush on Yuri.



IRIA FONS TASMERIA

The queen dowager. Lives away from public life in the detached palace.



GAZELL DAZ ANDERSON

A marquis and head of House Anderson, as well as general of the military.



DORSSEN KATABERIA

Son of the knight captain. Has a crush on Yuri.

characters

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

LOUIS DE ARMELIA

The Duke of Armelia and prime minister.



SHARIA

The king's first wife. Gave birth to a son and daughter before passing away.

MERIDA

Armelia Estate cook. Taken off the streets by Iris as a child.



ELLIA

Current queen and Prince Edward's mother.

SEBASTIAN

Butler for the Armelia Estate. Also managed the duchy.



VAN LUTASHA

Son of the Darryl pope. Loves Yuri.



DIDA

Iris's guard. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



LYLE

Iris's guard. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



IRIS LANA ARMELIA

Daughter of the Duke of Armelia. Regained memories from a past life.



REHME

Manages Duke Armelia's personal library. Taken off the streets by Iris as a child.



MONEDA

Vice-treasurer of the merchant guild. Taken off the streets by Iris as a child.



TANYA

Iris's personal handmaid. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



MERELLIS REISER ARMELIA

Wife to Duke Armelia. Iris's mother and the Flower of High Society.



SEI

Butler-in-training at the Armelia Estate. Taken off the streets by Iris as a child.



DEAN

Temporary employee of the Azuta Corporation. Very skilled.

KOUSHAKU REIJOU NO TASHINAMI Vol.1

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Chapter 1: The Duke's Daughter Reverses Fate

O_{w!}

The first thing I felt was pain. I had been lightly resting, but the pain woke me, and I regained “myself.”

If only I had awoken earlier.

I think most women, not just me, would think such a thing if they were on the floor, being held down by one strong man and surrounded by more. If this were a kidnapping, perhaps I could have allowed myself the sweet delusion that a prince on a white horse might soon appear to save me. Unfortunately, I was not currently being kidnapped—I was being convicted. Since I was the perpetrator of the crime rather than the victim, there would be no salvation for me.

I needed a bit of time to process what was happening, so I quickly reviewed what I knew of myself.

My name was Iris. Iris Lana Armelia, first daughter of Duke Armelia, a leader of the kingdom of Tasmeria; a flower in her prime at sixteen years old, if I did say so myself. My father was the head of state, while my mother was the daughter of a general. Their place in the upper echelons of Tasmeria's nobility meant our family was second only to the royal line.

But if I were to be more accurate, the current “me” was a mixture of Iris and another personality. My other half was from a country called Japan, and I had been an everyday working woman until I died in my thirties.

I had been a workaholic, and I was on my way home from a late night at the office when I died in an accident. The pain I felt just now in this world had suddenly awakened my past personality and memories. It was more or less exactly like that common trope wherein a character is overcome with fever and then awakens to their previous lives. That was how “I” and “I” combined.

Although now was probably not the time to come down with a fever.

To wit, after this fusion, I scanned my memories and had one thought: This place was exactly like the world of that game I was playing! I had no time for love in my previous life, yet I had still possessed the heart of a maiden that yearned for those sweet palpitations. Thus, I'd become hopelessly addicted to dating sims. I recalled spending all my breaks and evenings basking in their healing powers...

Ah, my bad. This wasn't the time to reminisce.

My current world was exactly identical to the one in a game I'd recently played: *You Are My Princess*, or *YAMP* for short. The story took place in a pseudo-medieval European setting, and you took the role of a low-class baron's daughter in a sort of Cinderella story where you met the top-ranking young nobles of an elite academy. It was a terribly common setup.

Your romance options were the haughty second prince, the athletic knight captain's son, the aloof prime minister's son, and the mysterious son of the Darryl pope. They were all pretty generic character types for the sort of story they were in.

Of course, there was also the cliché rival character as well: the person who interfered with the protagonist's romances and bullied them. In this case, that was the duke's daughter, fiancée to Second Prince Edward Tone Tasmeria. In other words, me—Iris.

If the protagonist, the lowly baron's daughter, tried to romance Edward, Iris came crashing in and did her best to disrupt her dates, even bullying her. But even a duke's daughter is just a girl unto herself. Without her father's power, the most Iris could ever do was say nasty things.

When I played *YAMP*, I remembered hating Iris. She ended the story confined to her home, disowned, and ultimately banished to a Darryl nunnery. At present, I couldn't help but pity her and think her punishment shouldn't have gone so far. After all, if you think about it, the protagonist approached an engaged man and initiated an illicit love affair. Normally, you'd consider that sort of person a villain, right? Anyone would hate them.

That said, no one in my current situation was willing to listen to my side of the story. I was all alone without any allies.

We were currently in the academy dining hall. Since all the

students lived in campus dormitories, they all ate here. Being a dining hall used by children of nobility, it was of course a grand building. The ceiling rose high above us, and large windows spaced at regular intervals captured the light above. Chandeliers dangled from multiple ceiling arches, illuminating perfectly aligned long tables. It was in this location, where every member of the academy congregated, that the game's ending took place.

Before me stood the heroine and three of her romance targets. We were surrounded by a gaggle of fools—I mean, academy students—watching us. As for me, I was restrained by the fourth romance target, forced onto my knees.

The wood flooring felt strangely cold.

Seriously, shouldn't my previous life's memories have awakened when I was still a young child? Why had they waited so long to return? At this point, the deck was completely stacked against me.

"If you have an excuse for your repeated transgressions against Yuri, now is the time to explain, Iris." Prince Edward's stern tone echoed. He looked down his nose at me, his gaze the epitome of contempt. That was the prince of a nation and a romance target for you. If I weren't on trial, I'd have loved to study his beautiful face for hours.

That flaming, crimson hair, those lambent black eyes... The features that normally made him so attractive only instilled fear in me now, amplifying his overpowering presence.

Yet I tore my eyes away.

"Would you kindly unhand me?" I asked the man restraining me.



The knight captain's son, Dorssen Kataberia, was powerful, and my arm was in serious pain. He ignored me, tightening his grip instead. He was always the silent type, so I hadn't exactly expected a response. It was just that it hurt quite badly, and I really wished he'd let go.

"You're hurting me. Please, release me. Don't you see the absurdity in you, the son of Knight Captain Doruna, a man sworn to protect the weak, forcefully restraining a frail girl like me?"

Finally, he twitched slightly. As I thought, knightly codes were the same in this world. The moment he loosened his grip, I wrenched myself from him and stood.

"You, a frail girl? Don't even joke." My younger brother, Berne Darshi Armelia, snorted. His chocolate-brown hair and sharp eyes always made him stand out in a crowd, and on the whole he resembled our father. Now, he looked at me with eyes of ice, a corner of his lips twisted in sarcasm.

He really ticked me off.

That said, no matter how screwed I was, I had zero intention of letting my irritation take control. I wouldn't make things worse for myself. "I'll admit, I was not exactly kind to Ms. Yuri Neuer, daughter of a baron," I said.

"That was easy."

"Quite. After all, *you* instigated this mock trial, taking up everyone's precious time. Thus, I shall endeavor to show sincerity."

"And why did you bully her?"

Alas, his question set me off. "Why? *You're* asking me why?"

My tone was somewhat icier than usual. For a second, Prince Edward's fury faltered. He knew the reason for my ire. Or perhaps, after being bewitched by the game's protagonist, his brain had turned to mush—the lovestruck fool. At least, this was how Iris's memories framed the situation. She had massaged the facts in her mind to give Prince Edward a little credit.

For my part, I had no patience for this farce. Ultimately, this entire showdown was simply a way for Prince Edward and his merry band to unleash their pent-up frustrations. It was also a way to legitimize Yuri's victimhood. If I accepted this lying down, I was doomed.

There was nothing more I could do, though. All that was left was to see if I could avoid being effectively exiled. The details of my fate would depend on my negotiations with my father. In any case, I would never again set foot in high society, nor would I return to this academy.

“In any case, I doubt I shall ever see any of you again. Would the good prince allow me to say my goodbyes? Everyone, thank you for all you have done for me thus far. I cannot begin to express how grateful I was to attend this academy as a student and to be treated so well by so many of you. Take care.”

I finished my speech with as much grace as I could muster and made to leave, but Prince Edward stopped me.

“Iris, wait!”

Couldn’t he read the room? Honestly, what had I ever seen in him?

“Before you leave, apologize to Yuri.”

Seriously, why did I love him, even for a second? Ugh. I gave it a second to make sure I hadn’t misheard him, and an awkward silence filled the air. “You wish for me, the daughter of a duke, to apologize to the daughter of a baron in public?” I said primly, though I wanted to shout.

It wasn’t just pride fueling my anger. I might have been “just” a duke’s daughter, but every one of my actions impacted not only my father’s name but all of noble society. If I apologized, the House of Armelia would in effect be bowing its head to a baron’s house. It was absolutely unheard of for the leader of a country to stoop in such a way. It would destabilize the ranks of every noble from marquis to earl. It might even instigate a full-scale revolt from those newly minted “nobles” and threaten the balance of power throughout our nation.

He really was a lovestruck fool. And was this really any way to address one’s former fiancée? *Put your hand to your heart and think carefully!* I thought.

The crowd seemed to share my sentiment, and the bed of nails beneath me softened as a number of them murmured in sympathy with my argument.

I couldn’t let this chance escape.

“I shall not apologize. It was the preservation of my dignity that

led me down this path, and even if it leads to my destruction, I shall not bend.” My implication: *I was prepared for this outcome.*

“Ms. Yuri. What more do you wish to steal from me? You’ve taken my fiancé, my position...” Here, I started to tear up, envisioning myself in the role of a tragic heroine. Oh! Alas!

As I did, the mood of the crowd swung ever further in my favor. The girl who had once been seen as an utter villain became, to them, the victim.

“No, all those things that make me who I am are mine alone—my dignity included. To apologize to you would be to crush myself under my own boot. So, no, I will *not* apologize, and I will not let you take anything more from me.”

Nailed it. Ah, that feels good.

Thus, riding on cloud nine, I left the dining hall for good. Prince Edward still appeared dissatisfied, while Yuri looked on in blank confusion. I exited the building and left campus, trusting in my father, who had a habit of being prepared for the oddest situations. As expected, he had already sent someone from home to retrieve me.

What a luxurious carriage... The Armelian coat of arms sat in gold upon a wine-red body, and I boarded it alone. More people would be sent later to gather my things and either bring them back to our estate or dispose of them.

This was my goodbye to the academy. I would never again return, no matter if my fate followed that of the story and I was stripped of my status and locked away, or even if I managed to wrangle some other option. My father would wish me to distance myself from this place.

I sighed. The act was over. Thus far, I had only followed the narrative as I knew it. There was no plot left for me to chase. Most pressingly, I was about to face the last boss, so to speak: my father. Honestly, I was even more nervous than before. As the carriage gently set off for the Armelia mansion in the capital, my feelings couldn’t help but grow heavier.

The Armelia mansion was our family home, situated in the capital.

In it resided my father, who could never be away from the capital due to his position as Prime Minister, and my mother, who had followed him there. Constructed of reddish-brown bricks and adorned with white pillars, it was far more extravagant than one might expect of a second home. From knowledge of my past life, I was aware this was quite the mansion, but the main house in our territory exceeded this one in more than a few ways. I entered and walked through the entrance hall, treading upon red carpet as I made my way to my room.

I'd been thrown out of the academy. I was mortified. The shame naturally quickened my pace. Upon reaching my lovely white and pink room, I breathed a sigh of relief. I sank into the sofa and felt just a bit at ease. My battle with the last boss was imminent. I needed to destress.

My personal handmaid, Tanya, burst in with tears in her eyes. "My lady!"

"Oh, Tanya. I just got back."

Tanya was born a commoner, but she had mastered etiquette and had refined features to match. Not a hair of her complicated braids was ever out of place, and I often thought her appearance could make any heart keen. The simple navy-blue uniform suited her to a T.

"How can you be so calm? I've been tearing my hair out in frustration!"

Seeing her tear up for my sake warmed my heart. At the same time, I felt quite guilty to have caused her such worry.

Tanya was born in the slums, like so many others. As a child, I'd often sneaked out into town, and in the course of my adventures, I had brought her into my household. Back then, the weight of the title of a duke's daughter had weighed heavily upon me. It had been difficult to find anyone to simply chat with, given my family's place in noble society. Not even those within my household could serve that role. So when I picked a commoner girl up off the streets that day, it had been for the awful, selfish reason of wanting someone to talk to. However, Tanya had been so grateful to me that she ended up becoming a perfect servant. It would not be an overstatement to call her my sister.

"Well, calm yourself, Tanya. It's not yet time to drown ourselves in sorrow."

"Of course. Forgive me. The master should be returning this evening."

Tanya was a quick thinker and adaptable, to boot. Her tears vanished into thin air as she regained her composure and delivered the information I desired.

“I see. Then get me a drink to settle my nerves, would you?”

“Yes, my lady.”

She made to leave the room, but I opened my mouth to stop her. “Tanya?”

“Yes, my lady?”

“Thank you.”

Very wordy, I know. But it was all I could think of. *Thank you for worrying about me. Thank you for crying for me.* So many emotions crammed into those two short words.

“If I may be so bold, my lady: I serve you, not House Armelia. Thus, I shall never forgive Prince Edward for betraying you, even if he is of the royal line. And no matter what may happen between you and your father, I shall always be on your side.”

“I’m a lucky girl, aren’t I?”

“Not at all. I’m the lucky one here. And I think you would do well to remember that those within this household who share my position feel the same.”

I had, in my youth, actually elevated six commoners into our household. Ever since I was a little girl, I’d been considered quite the oddball. Instead of presents, I’d ask my parents to take in orphans such as Tanya. At first my parents resisted, but seeing as I never asked for anything else, they eventually gave in. Every year since, I’d invited another orphan around my age off the streets and into our home.

None of this information was provided in the game. Perhaps even though my previous life’s memories hadn’t yet awoken, they had still influenced my actions. In any case, my chats with my friends were precious because they allowed me to momentarily forget the burden of my title. As the years went by, outside pressure had forced us to draw a clear line between our roles as mistress and servants. Even so, they were each invaluable to me.

“I appreciate you saying so, Tanya, but please, I want you to think of your own happiness first and foremost. That goes for the others as well.”

Tanya looked at me, puzzled. Her expression would, to an outsider, appear utterly blank, but our years together had taught me how to read her.

“It was my selfishness that dragged you into this rigid world,” I said. “If you wish, you may take your leave whenever you desire. In fact, it might be prudent to reconsider your futures now—”

Unbelievably, Tanya cut me off. “My lady, please don’t say such things anymore. I should have died that day, all those years ago. But it was you, and no one else, who saved me. Ever since, my life has been yours. The day I leave your side will be the day I die...or the day you deem me unnecessary.”

“Well, then I suppose it’s until death do us part.”

I tried to make a joke, but Tanya didn’t budge an inch. In fact, she smiled happily. “There would be no greater happiness for me.”

“All right... I understand your feelings. I really am a lucky soul. But there is more than one form of happiness, Tanya. So please don’t forget what I said earlier.”

“As you wish, my lady.” Tanya reluctantly nodded.

If I was to be stripped of my status and banished to a nunnery, I didn’t want her to share my fate. She was too important to me. But I got the sneaking feeling she’d come along anyway. I really had to win over my father, didn’t I? For Tanya’s sake, to say nothing of my own.

My determination renewed, I sipped the tea Tanya prepared for me. Divine, as usual.

As I started to relax, another servant knocked on my door. “My lady.”

“Come in.”

This time, the head maid, Elulu, entered. She managed all the female servants, and as expected, her maid uniform was impeccable. “Pardon me, my lady. The master is calling for you.”

“Oh, already? I was told he wouldn’t be back until evening.”

“He returned early upon hearing of your situation.”

“Well...” I sighed. Ugh, where had that resolve gone? My stomach was all in knots.

“If you don’t mind my saying, my lady, I believe any reprimand

from your father on this count would be unnecessary, to say the least.”

It shocked me to hear this from Elulu, who was normally so strict.

“The household is on your side, my lady. So hold your head high when you go to meet the master.”

In the story I knew, Iris was described as a villain. But as I combed through my memories, I confronted a different truth: one where she—I—had built a deep relationship with her family’s servants, one founded outside the strictures of class. In other words, I had berated the protagonist for being “merely a baron’s daughter” not because her rank mattered to me but because my love for Prince Edward had driven me to terrible jealousy. I was slowly beginning to feel less dissonance with the “Iris” part of myself.

Right. After all, right now, I’m Iris. I had to make “Iris” happy for my own sake.

My determination restored, I followed Elulu to my father’s study, Tanya close on my heels.

“We’re here, my lady.”

“Thank you, Elulu. Tanya, would you wait here as well?”

“As you wish.”

I’d arrived at the battlefield. The thick, heavy door loomed before me. I swallowed and steadied my breathing. Then I knocked.

“Enter.”

“Pardon me, Father.”

A grave atmosphere surrounded us as I sat across from him. An intelligent-looking man, his eyes glinted sharply as befitted the sitting prime minister. He always gave off a stern aura, but in the moment, that effect seemed to double. It was nearly impossible to remain opposite him.

“My apologies for making you take time out of your busy day,” I said.

“Oh? You understand the gravity of your actions, then?”

“No.”

A vein twitched in my father’s temple, or so it seemed to me. Frightening, to say the least.

“I do not believe I have caused trouble for my father the prime minister or my father the duke,” I declared. “The one I believe I ought to apologize to is my father as my father.”

“And why is that?”

“First of all, the most anyone could say I did against the girl was make a handful of snide comments toward her. More importantly, the girl and the prince were the ones who disrespected House Armelia by one-sidedly breaking off our engagement. As I have extricated myself from the situation, they can’t do much more to besmirch our name. Furthermore, at the academy, I left my former peers with the impression that there were extenuating circumstances, so we should not expect any waves from that crowd. No matter how Prince Edward whines, the most anyone could in their rights deliver to our door would be a warning.”

“I’ve already been informed of the events at the academy.”

“Of course. Also, as to apologizing to my father the duke...weren’t you initially against my engagement to Prince Edward?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because with the prominence of our bloodline, my marriage to the second prince could have destroyed the balance of power in the royal family. I needn’t remind you that you are the duke and prime minister, while Mother is the only daughter of a prominent general. Marrying the first prince would be one thing, but if I were to marry the second, the country might one day see a civil war.”

Here, for the first time, my father made an expression: a sadistic sneer, so comical you could almost hear the background sound effects. I’m sure that wasn’t his intention, which made it all the more frightening. “Assuming that’s all as you say, why do you think I approved your engagement to Prince Edward?”

I ran through a multitude of possibilities and settled on the answer that seemed to fit best. “Because either result was good for you.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“If I were engaged to the first prince, then my brother would serve him and solidify his foundation. If I were engaged to the second prince, then my brother would join the first prince’s camp. In that case, I would be in a position to observe the second prince’s movements while hoping

to take the reins, were he to prove troublesome for the kingdom. The former option would require no work and be extremely simple, strategically speaking, so I suppose you *did* prefer that one.”

The trouble was, in YAMP’s story, the first prince was hardly in the spotlight. In fact, the game was written as if it assumed the second prince would succeed the throne. Reality was not so simple, however. The first prince was the child of the king’s wife, who had passed away, while the second prince was his illegitimate child by his current and only concubine. One might think that meant the first prince was still next in line for the throne, but things seldom go as one expects.

The king’s concubine was the daughter of a marquis currently amassing power, while the former queen had been the daughter of an earl. Thus, in terms of hierarchy, the concubine outranked her. However, the king had fallen passionately in love with her and ignored a multitude of objections in order to marry the late queen. This was the reason for the current strange balance of power. Noble society, built upon this strange balance, was clearly at a tipping point.

None of this balancing act, which was my reality, had made it into the game. The writers had instead opted to simply say the first prince was studying at a foreign academy, and that was it. I’d not thought much about it, but reality was far harsher. Also, since my father served the country, not the royal family, he maintained a neutral position in regard to their squabbles. His support of the first prince was a decision based on a law stating that the first prince inherited the right of succession. However, if the first prince turned out to be a fool, my father would abandon him for the country without a second thought. After all, a foolish king would throw Tasmeria into chaos.

“That said, my brother is utterly devoted to the second prince,” I continued. “In which case, you would have inevitably done your best to break up my engagement with him. So aren’t you happy, Father?”

Even after this incident, my father would have found a way to force our engagement, had he wanted it. Our ducal house certainly had the power to do so. If my engagement was well and truly broken, it only remained so because my father wished it.

“Bwa ha ha ha ha!” My father laughed elatedly, though he sounded rather like a villain to me. If a third party saw him, they would surely shrink back. “You’re right. I did hope you two would break it off. To that end, I repeatedly told your brother to distance himself from the

second prince, but that numbskull completely forgot himself. He's a tawdry sycophant now, alas. Are you truly all right with this, though, Iris? I was so sure you had feelings for the second prince."

"Love is a fever. Once it cools, that's it. I'm glad this happened early on." What I endured would have caused even a love of a hundred years to frost over.

"Hm. But, Iris, to the masses, this appears to be your failure. Thus, I must have you take responsibility."

"I see..." So I wouldn't be able to avoid being stripped of my status and exiled to a nunnery, would I? Tanya would likely try to accompany me; I'd have to do my best to convince her to stay with the house.

"You will return to our domain and be placed under house arrest. It is far from the capital, though, so I'm afraid I'll have no way of knowing whether you obey my orders."

"Huh?"

Was he saying I could do whatever I wanted? *Wait, so no nunnery?*

"It would also be a waste to have you simply sit around all day, so I'll be appointing you the acting lady of the land. Don't disappoint me with your governance."

Acting lady? In other words, he wanted me to govern our domain in his place? *What would one even call this? A windfall? Pearls before swine? No, neither's right!*

I was so confused that nonsensical phrases kept popping into my head. But first, I asked the question weighing most heavily on my mind. "Isn't this role reserved for the eldest son?"

"I could bestow it on him, but he wouldn't go. He seems quite stricken by that 'illness' you spoke of."

True. It was my brother's infatuation with Yuri that had led him to become so close with the second prince, the man he had been instructed to hold at arm's length. No doubt he would spend any future extended holidays here in the capital, seeking more flirtations. Concerningly, since Yuri was with the second prince now, that should have been all the more reason for him to distance himself from them. Perhaps my brother hoped to elevate himself by ensuring his beloved's happiness with the prince. What nonsense.

“I understand,” I said at length. “I will make our domain into one that will not be shaken, no matter what happens in the capital.”

My father nodded, satisfied, and dismissed me from the room.

Once Iris exited the room, Louis de Armelia, her father, reflected on their conversation and chuckled. A great deal had happened, and all in a single day. First, Iris’s expulsion from the academy and the nullification of her engagement...all in step with established procedure. The truth was, he could have stopped her at any point once he learned of her actions during the term. He hadn’t, however, in order to have her engagement nullified.

That was for the best. Even if his daughter hadn’t acted like a lovelorn fool, he would have claimed she was sick and had the engagement nullified by his own power. Either way, once that was done, he had intended to make her step back from noble society by entering a nunnery. She had been so besotted with the second prince that he had been sure she wouldn’t listen, but such was the way of willful girls.

However, at this evening’s meeting, Iris had seemed calm, even relieved, despite the humiliating final encounter with the man she loved. Not only that, she managed to express her arguments with incisive clarity.

Interesting... he thought.

The demands of his position meant he wasn’t often able to interact with his children, leaving his wife to spoil them instead. It seemed his daughter had grown into a well-bred noble, with no faults to speak of. His son, on the other hand, had grown overconfident and seemed to lack any kind of follow-through. The duke’s plan had been to whip his son into shape once he started his governing duties.

Plans aside, his daughter had spoken with surprising insight into key elements, and even guessed his thoughts with pinpoint accuracy. *How tragic*, he thought at first, *that my daughter should possess a keener eye for the flow of the world than my son*. At least she knew her worth.

All in all, it was as if, in the blink of an eye, she had become a

totally different person. However, during her speech, he'd reflected on prior cases of her odd behavior. The most prominent example of this was her disinterest in expensive presents; instead, she repeatedly negotiated for permission to take in common-born orphans.

The duke had initially assumed Iris desired a set of servants trained to attend her needs from an early age, and thus he had given his consent. Her repeated failure to treat the orphans as her staff had seemed quite strange, but he let it pass for a time, until the day he insisted on a shred of decorum. Her expression today had brought him straight back to that time.

She does nothing with these orphans. What a waste, he'd thought. And now here he was, appointing her acting governor. What a whimsical impulse. Fortunately, Sebastian was currently governing in the duke's place; he would prevent Iris from making any truly irreversible mistakes.

All in all, it would prove interesting to see exactly what Iris could accomplish.

As the duke continued to mull over their exchange, his wife, Merellis Reiser Armelia, entered the study.

"Dear, must Iris really...?" She didn't yet know what he'd told their daughter. Thus, concerned, Merellis had come to ask about her.

"No, I changed my mind. She is to return to our territory and assume duties as acting governor."

"My! But isn't that too much responsibility?" Her tone leapt for joy upon hearing Iris wouldn't be confined to a nunnery, but her concern quickly found a new roost.

"She showed promise today. It could be fruitful to test her."

"Really? I understand she was far too straightforward in today's incident, so entrusting her with such a task... It worries me."

Today's incident... In other words, the nullification of her engagement due to her quarrels with a baron's daughter. Iris had come straight out and admitted to her "snide comments." The duke snorted. Iris could have used her position as a duke's daughter to gain allies, solidify her foundation, and manipulate popular sentiment, if she'd so wished. And yet she had resorted to the most frivolous, straightforward tactics imaginable.

As a result, she'd been chased into a corner with no chance to defend herself against things she hadn't even done. She had allowed herself to be used by the other children who disliked the baron's daughter. *They* had masterfully manipulated the situation, incriminating Iris for events she had not in truth been involved with. Louis couldn't help but wish Iris had picked up a bit of Merellis's worldly wisdom. He disliked how his wife coddled their children, but she was strict with herself and her conduct was such that, as her husband, Louis never had reason to interfere with her affairs. At present, Merellis seemed to blame Louis for foreseeing the fallout and doing nothing to stop it.

"Iris must have learned something from this incident," Louis mused. "She really has changed. She spoke as if she truly understood her position."

"Well... Hee hee! You still seem so calm. I suppose she didn't hit upon your *true* intentions yet, did she?"

Louis smiled wryly. There *was* one thing Iris had failed to pick up on: the reason he had permitted her engagement. As prime minister, he of course would have preferred she be betrothed to the first prince. However, he'd assented to her union with Prince Edward simply because his daughter wanted it. People called him the Icy Prime Minister, but in the end, he was just another father inclined to be sweet on his daughter.

Ultimately, as Iris had stated, he had resigned himself to thinking of the engagement as a means to control the second prince. Once it was approved, he had abandoned the notion of hands-off neutrality and taken to following the royal family's every move, adjusting his long-term plans in accordance.

I was so convinced that with my power, I could shape the world how I wished... I hardly deserve to judge my son. The corner of the duke's lips turned up in a sneer. In reality, the battle for the throne had grown privately vicious, despite his efforts. Eventually, Iris would be thrown into that whirlpool.

Thus, he had decided to have her step back from noble society before she fell too deep into the current. Of course, once the commotion died down, he'd planned to have her return home. But Iris's performance today made him rethink this decision. She was no longer a little girl to be coddled and protected. In fact, the duke even dared hope she could overcome the rapids on her own. He was excited to see just

how she would proceed.

Upon receiving my father's orders I, Iris, moved to the duchy of Armelia. Today was my first day back.

The duchy of Armelia was situated southeast of the capital, about a week's carriage ride away taking the straightest road. To the east was the sea, and to the west rose mountains. Its lands were vast, second only to the capital, and it overflowed with natural beauty. Its port and bountiful agriculture put it in a unique position to trade with other countries. Furthermore, the careful policies of generations of dukes had long maintained public order.

Before entering the academy, Berne, my mother, and I had spent our days here outside of the social season. Ever since I moved away, however, I had spent even my extended holidays at the country estate, so it did feel quite nostalgic to be back.

The bright rising sun illuminated the land as I did my early morning yoga. Morning exercise wakes up the body and is good for your health. And, well, I'd grown a little chubby. The grand position of duke's daughter meant I could eat as much luxurious, high-calorie food as I wanted, so of course I'd put on weight. Thus, on top of exercise, I had also decided to diet.

"Good morning, my lady—eep!"

"Oh, Tanya. Morning."

Obviously, she had come with me to the duchy. Since I wasn't to be banished to a nunnery, I assumed this was fine. But what had her so riled up?

"Morning,' nothing! My lady, what in the world are you doing dressed like that?"

"Dressed like what?"

I looked at my clothes: a hastily thrown-on servant's hemp pants and top. Perfect for exercising, no? "I'm thinking of exercising every morning to keep up my health. I chose something easy to move in, but was that a mistake?"

“You’re...exercising?” Tanya looked at me, puzzled. I suppose it was odd, to say the least, to see a daughter of the peerage stretching and moving in such a way.

“Yes, I read in a book that if you don’t keep your body moving, it’s bad for your health. Thus, I’ll be doing this every morning. Try not to be surprised every time.”

“Understood... Forgive me.”

“It’s fine. Now that I’m sweaty, could you draw me a bath?”

“Of course.”

Once Tanya was done, I bathed and then had breakfast. Since I had just exercised, I had quite an appetite. I still remembered to maintain a healthy nutritional balance, though.

“I’d like to speak to Sebastian about the future. Could you set up an appointment for me?”

“Right away.”

Tanya quickly did as I asked, and just before noon I went to see Sebastian.

Sebastian was our family’s butler. He was the top servant of the household, and my father had entrusted him with governing the duchy. As he entered the room, his aura reminded me of Elulu’s. In other words, his tailcoat was in perfect order and he radiated strictness, yet his clean, efficient movements put one at ease. Truly a model butler, and a silver fox if I might add.

“Sorry to summon you like this. I know you must be busy.”

“Not at all. I am your hands and feet, my lady. Please feel free to summon me at any time.”

“Oh? Then let’s get down to it. Could you bring me all the finance reports from the last three years, as well as summarize the current governance structures in a report?”

“As you wish. But what will you be doing with all of that?”

“Reading, of course. Somehow, I’ve managed to be appointed

acting governor by Father. But I'm ashamed to admit I haven't the slightest idea of how well the duchy's economy fares, to say nothing of the state of the city. So could you give me one month?"

"One month, my lady?"

"Yes. I believe that is how long I'll need to read all the material and perform my own observational analysis."

"Understood. However, a great deal will need to be prepared for your observation excursions. About a week, perhaps."

"On the contrary, I intend to observe from an anonymous standpoint in order to gain a more accurate understanding of the situation. This will require as few assistants as possible, which I will appoint myself. This is to say, there's no need for you to waste your time, Sebastian."

"Forgive me for my presumption."

"No, it's fine. I'll be leaning heavily on you in regard to finance in the future. Please feel free to speak your mind."

After Sebastian left, I summoned Tanya.

"Tanya, call up Lyle, Dida, and Rehme, will you?"

"Yes, my lady."

A few minutes later, three people followed Tanya into the room. I had known each since I was a child—more orphans I'd taken in. Lyle had beautiful blond hair and a noble face, but his muscled body was made for fighting, and he was the equal of even the royal knights. Thus, I employed him and Dida as my bodyguards. Dida's brown hair extended to his shoulders, which he tied into a tail. Compared to Lyle, he was quite physically delicate, and a bit of an aloof weirdo, but he was just as reliable.

Rehme, the girl with glasses, loved books with a passion and was our family's librarian. When I say librarian, I mean that she was in charge of the duke's private collection, which rivaled that of a public facility. Because of this, her job was terribly important.

"Long time no see, everyone," I said.



Their jobs meant they hadn't been able to come with me to the academy, so they had remained here. When I left, I'd told them they were free to seek employment wherever they pleased, but as usual they remained. It made me happy, but at the same time, I felt guilty.

"It's good to see you, Princess." The first to answer was Dida. As usual, his tone was joking and the grin on his face undeniably cheeky.

"Dida, you still dare take that tone with Lady Iris?"

"It's fine, Lyle," I told him. "You're all like family to me. It makes me happy when you all act like the old days—when we're alone, at least."

"But, Lady Iris..."

"Please, Lyle."

Lyle sighed heavily and acquiesced. "Understood."

"As you all know, Prince Edward broke off his engagement with me. Thus, I've returned home."

"I don't accept it! Why do you have to lose your engagement *and* be sentenced to house arrest?" Rehme was just as frustrated as Tanya, and tears welled in her eyes.

"I know, right?" Dida snorted. "Honestly, that kid has no taste."

"Thank you. But what's done is done. Besides, I really am overjoyed to be back here with you all again," I insisted. "Now, to the main point. You're all aware that I've been appointed acting governor, yes? So before I take up the role, I thought I'd go and take the measure of our lands. Will you all accompany me on my journey?"

"Of course."

"Guarding the princess, huh? Sounds exciting."

The two boys were ready to go, but Rehme's expression was more difficult to read.

"I understand why you'd ask them, since they're your guards, but why me?" she said.

"Because I desire to draw on your knowledge, of course," I said.

"Eh?!"

"You've read every single book we own, haven't you? There must have been some on this duchy's history and geography. I must depend

on the knowledge you gained from those books. There's an incredible difference between going into a situation blind and having some idea of what you're dealing with."

Our family's book collection really was quite impressive, due to the generations of prime ministers we'd brought up. The library was the largest room in the mansion and completely buried in books of all different genres. There were books of fiction, books devoted to the various past patriarchs' hobbies, and nonfiction tomes on governance, geography, law, and more. It was my belief that Rehme, who had read every one of those books, was a treasure trove of insight.

"In that case, I understand." Rehme nodded. "I'll do my best to fulfill my duty."

"My plan is to leave two days from now. Inform Tanya once you've packed everything you need. Tanya, I'm entrusting you with preparations."

"Understood."

"Oh, and could someone contact Moneda for me?"

"Moneda, my lady?"

"Yes, that's right. He works for the merchant guild, doesn't he?"

The merchant guild, as its name implied, was an organization formed by various businesses. Moneda was one of the orphans I'd taken in, but he had quit as my servant and joined the guild once I entered the academy.

"Yes, I was told he's an accountant for them. I'll arrange for a message to be sent."

"Thanks, Lyle. Try to book him toward the very end of our trip."

"Understood."

We went over our trip plans in more detail, and then I dismissed the trio. With perfect timing, the documents I had requested from Sebastian arrived so I could scan through them. Truth be told, when I lived in Japan, I had worked at a tax office. Thanks to that, I was pretty good at digesting income, expenditures, and other financial statements. I followed the numbers with little difficulty.

"My lady, it is time for lunch."

"Oh, is it that time already?"

Time flies when you're having fun, I suppose. It was already noon. Still, I was thankful my food has been prepared for me. In my previous life, I had been so busy that I had never paid much attention to my nutritional needs.

I wolfed lunch down and then got back to work. I remembered to properly chew, though. I couldn't forget my diet. Even so, it was nice to have work to take my mind off my hunger.

As Tanya watched over Iris, her head buried in a pile of documents on her study desk, she reflected on the past.

It's been one surprise after another.

First of all, it was a miracle that she was even here right now, serving the duke's family. Tanya had no surname. No one had one in the slum where she was raised. There had been no time to care about names when things like food—or even seeing the next day—were never guaranteed.

How had she ended up as a servant to the leading noble family in the country, then? It had been purely Iris's whim. She'd saved Tanya from dying on the side of the road, and that would have been more than anyone need do. Yet she also called Tanya "important" and treated her like a friend. For this reason, Tanya had resolved to serve Iris with all her heart. Iris had given someone so meaningless to the world a reason to live.

It had been almost ten years since Tanya had entered Iris's service. Ten years of happiness, she was proud to say. But that happiness had almost been destroyed by Iris's ex-fiancé, Edward. The second prince, despite being spoken for, had fallen head over heels for some baron's daughter. Tanya had been forced to watch as, day by day, Iris's expression darkened and her smile disappeared.

That said, it came as a shock when Iris gave in to the fires of jealousy and lambasted the baron's daughter in public. It had been beyond frustrating to see her like that and be unable to intercede. At the same time, rage toward the second prince had filled Tanya's body. How could such a scoundrel be a man of the royal family? How could he be

so blind to Iris's virtues? How dare he besmirch her honor by falling for some lesser noble's daughter? He had even humiliated her by restraining her in public. It was unbelievable. There would be no forgiving him.

Yet Iris, upon returning to the duchy's estate, looked refreshed.

What? But she was so in love before. What happened? Tanya had thought, but she decided against asking so as not to dredge up any old wounds. What was more important was Iris's future. This was what Tanya wanted to focus on.

Of course, no matter where Iris was sent, Tanya would follow. And ultimately, though Iris's sentence was an extremely light one, the condition that came with it had made it impossible for Tanya to relax.

My lady, the governor? What is the master thinking? She could still barely believe it.

Iris had received an education befitting her noble status, but if you had asked Tanya whether that education was practically useful, well, that was a different matter. While Iris's brother had learned governance and finance, Iris's studies had centered on etiquette until her time at the academy. There, she had studied arithmetic, poetry, and language, and had also been given a general education in history and geography. What exactly could she accomplish with that?

But right now, Iris's eyes flowed over the cluttered documents of difficult numbers with such speed that she truly seemed to be reading them. Every now and again, she'd jot something down on a piece of paper, further evidence of her ability to digest them.

My lady truly is beyond my understanding, Tanya thought. At the same time, she couldn't help but smile at the unending surprises. Forget ten years—a year ago, she couldn't have imagined Iris serving in such a position.

Tanya glanced at the clock and noticed it had gotten quite late. Iris's head was still buried in documents. Only the sound of papers flipping echoed in the room. Tanya resolved to come check on her from time to time, in order to ensure Iris didn't fatigue herself with this intense study.

A day had passed since Sebastian delivered the documents I asked for. The mountain of papers still sat on my desk. I wanted to keep reading, but Tanya begged me to take a break, so I decided to go stretch my legs and explore the mansion. I hadn't been back in ages, yet still I hadn't taken the time to look around.

The mansion in the capital was of fine construction, don't get me wrong, but it was nothing compared to this place. First, there was the space. Oh, the space! If you asked me how big it was, it would be difficult for me to say, as I'd never measured it. I mean, it took fifteen minutes to walk from the front gate to the mansion itself, which was quite a shock to my past self. The path was lined with fountains spewing water, and depending on the season, the gardens bloomed with flowers. It was quite a sight for any visitor. When I'd seen it from the carriage last evening, I had been overcome with nostalgia and comfort.

The mansion was enormous, but the area behind it was easily double the size. Vegetation sprawled about, and there was a body of water too large to be a pond, yet too small to be a lake. Near this body of water, although you couldn't see it from the mansion, was a stable. Beyond that was a forest. The grounds were so vast, I didn't think I had ever walked every corner of it.

In any case, today I chose the backyard to explore. The wind brushed my cheek, gently shaking the trees. What idyllic weather. Basking in the calming effects of the scenery, I headed for the stable. The last time I visited, I had been a child, so I took care not to get lost.

"Is the stable really this way?"

After a few minutes I was, ironically, lost. My memories were so hazy. Still, you really wouldn't expect to get lost on your own property, would you? I could still see the mansion, though, so in the worst-case scenario, I could always head back that way. Actually, I was itching to get back to work, so I supposed I would have to give up on the stable. It was my home, so I could try to find it whenever the mood struck me next. That was what I told myself as I turned around.

"Huh?"

In the corner of my eye, I spotted familiar blond hair. Lyle?

I decided to take a detour and stepped off the path. Before I realized it, I was in the thick of the trees. Could I still make it back to

the mansion from here? What if it wasn't Lyle? Worry filled me, but to my relief, I did indeed come upon my faithful bodyguard, who seemed to be practicing with his sword. He swung a heavy blade in a clearing, dripping with sweat.

"Is that you, my lady?"

I was beyond surprised that he sensed me without looking. "How did you know it was me? Do you have eyes in the back of your head?"

"It's the result of my training, I guess you could say. I train so I can fight in pitch darkness and sense presences. I can identify a person even with the slightest of footsteps or smells."

"That's still impressive. Sorry, I must be intruding."

"No, I was just thinking of finishing." He lowered his sword.

"Well, if you say so," I said, stepping into the clearing to glance around.

"My lady, what brings you out here?"

"Huh? Oh, I was looking over the documents Sebastian gave me, but Tanya insisted I take a break. So I figured I'd stretch my legs and walk to the stable."

"The stable?" Lyle frowned. "That's more to the west, I'm afraid. You must have taken a wrong turn."

"I see... No wonder I was getting nowhere."

The forest, thick with trees, filled my vision. In other words, I'd come to the northern corner of the estate. If memory served, the stable should have been right in front of the woods.

"It's not often I see you walking around outside," said Lyle.

"Right. Well, I haven't been home in years, I guess. Say, Lyle, where are you headed now?"

Lyle chuckled, picking up on the implication of my question. Embarrassed, I glared at him.

"Forgive me. My duty is to be your bodyguard, so please allow me to accompany you back to the mansion."

As long as he was headed there, he could at least show me the way. Of course, I was grateful for his willingness to help. Lyle knelt at my feet, paying respect to his liege. The overdramatic gesture elicited a

smile from me.

“Yes, I’ll be counting on you.” Giggling, I took his extended hand.

“It would be my honor,” Lyle replied with the utmost seriousness, smiling as well.

“So, do you train out here often?” I asked as we walked back to the mansion.

“If I ever have a block of free time, yes, I mostly train out here, and you are welcome to observe.”

“But you train with the other guards as well, don’t you? You sure are passionate.”

The Armelia family employed a number of private soldiers to protect the property and serve as guards to its household. Lyle and Dida were members of this company.

“Dida trains in secret, too.”

“He does? I can’t imagine it.”

“He hates letting other people see him work hard. But every day, he steadily gets stronger. Perhaps I do so as well simply because I don’t want to let him beat me.” Lyle grinned awkwardly.

“Hee hee. I think that’s fine. Dida would probably say the same thing.”

“If you say so.”

“You two have always squabbled over everything. Some would call you good rivals.”

Ever since we were children, Dida would swagger into a situation, make a mess, and Lyle would come sweeping up behind him. But whenever they ended up truly competing, it became an outright slugfest. If memory served, Dida would often dive in headfirst. Then the competition would fizzle out, with no clear winner in sight.

“I hope I can count on you two for my protection on this trip.”

Whatever their reasons for training, if it made them stronger, then there was nothing for me to say. As long as this trip went smoothly.

“Of course,” he said.

I could feel the pride in his smile.

Chapter 2:

The Duke's Daughter Sets Out on a Trip

OVER TWO DAYS, I somehow managed to get through reading the documents. With that out of the way, I decided to tackle exploring the duchy as planned, from the capital to the border forests. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to see literally everything, so this time, my plan was to visit the south, where revenue was precipitously dropping, as well as the east, where revenue was skyrocketing.

The ladies of the group (Tanya, Rehme, and I) rode in the carriage, while Lyle and Dida accompanied us on horseback. Including the driver, there were six of us. From the carriage window, I watched as the scenery moved past. We'd been traveling for a few minutes, but our pace was relaxed, so we weren't outside the capital yet. What a beautiful city, full of history. The flow of people was heavy and somewhat restless... At least, that was the impression I got.

"It's lively, isn't it?" I said.

"Of course!" said Rehme. "This city is touted as the second royal capital due to its growth."

"Right..."

Just then, a certain district caught my eye. Most of it was hidden from view, but it gave off a grimy vibe. Even from afar, the flow of people there was obviously reduced.

"Say, Rehme, what's that?"

An awkward expression filled Rehme's face as she realized what I was pointing at. "Oh, that's..."

"Please, Rehme. Don't hide anything. Just tell me."

She sighed in resignation. "That's a slum. It popped up recently."

"A slum? How did it come to be?"

"There are many reasons. They're populated by drifters from other territories, people with debts, people who came to the big city with dreams but ended up starving, and even people who have lived in slums with their families for generations. But the biggest reason would be that

they couldn't pay their taxes. The second and third sons of farmers tend to end up in places like this."

Rehme's words made my heart constrict. Was it pity for these poor people, or anger at the cruelty of their situation?

"Taxes, huh? How long has it been since our tax system was updated?"

"I believe the last time was five generations ago, my lady."

Her quick reply made me sigh. "It hasn't changed in that long?"

"Still, this slum is better than most. Unlike other territories, there are still jobs to be found in the duchy, even if the pay's low. Also, our civil ordinances circumvent persecution."

"I see. But this place..." I swallowed the words I was about to say.

"What's the matter, Lady Iris?"

"It's nothing. I'll probably be pestering you with many more questions, but I hope you'll still answer them."

"Yes, my lady."

Our conversation finished, I returned to looking out the carriage window. At some point, the slum had disappeared from view.

But this place... The words I'd swallowed earlier echoed in my mind, unabated. *But this place is full of children just like you all were.*

I still remembered my meeting with each of them like it was yesterday: wild eyes, thin bodies, and covered in filth. Neither "me" had seen a child like that before, so the first time had come as quite a shock. At the time, all I had been able to do was take the individual children before my eyes from that environment. Now, however, I might be able to help them in a different way—and more. This was the nature of the power I had obtained.

My thoughts distracting me, we eventually exited through the gates and left the city. Outside the city walls, the countryside was dotted with what appeared to be houses amidst abundant nature. Its beauty calmed my heart. Unlike the city's roads, the one we were now on wasn't maintained, and the ride became quite bumpy. Every now and again, the carriage swayed violently.

I lazily watched the unchanging scenery until eventually we could see the next town. We would spend the night there, and then it would

be a week and a few days' ride south to our first objective: the southern village.

"It's hot..."

I couldn't help but comment, and Rehme, seated in front of me, nodded. It was *really* hot. Tanya had made sure to prepare my coolest dress, but what's hot is hot.

"What can you do? The duchy stretches from north to south, and obviously the farther south you go, the muggier it gets."

She said that, but... When I looked over at Tanya sitting next to me, even in this melting heat, she alone maintained a frosty expression.

"My lady, we can rest in a bit. Please bear it for a little longer," she said anxiously when she noticed my stare.

"Thanks." I grinned tightly, then returned my eyes to the scenery.

It had changed quite a bit on our journey. It was still rich with nature, but the varieties of trees and flowers popping up between them were clearly of different species from those in the northern clime. After what seemed like an eternity of being rocked by the carriage, we stopped for a break by a small stream.

"Lyle, Dida, aren't you hot?"

Since they were our guards, they wore heavy-looking armor. Surprisingly, though, it was much lighter than their official armor.

"This is what training is for," Lyle responded with a refreshing smile, a few beads of sweat dripping from his cheeks.

"No training can change the temperature. With your permission, Princess, I'd jump in that water this instant." Dida cackled to himself.

"Even if she permits you, I wouldn't," Tanya said flatly, shooting him down.

"Aw, don't be like that, Tanya."

I found myself smiling for some reason. When our break was over, we got back in the rocking carriage and headed for the village. Before long, we reached where it was located at the duchy's southernmost

point. Crude wooden fencing surrounded the village. It was nothing like the capital, and its wooden buildings were all run-down. Upon entering, I saw there was hardly any foot traffic. The few people we saw were all starved and thin.

Who has it better, them or the people in the city slums? I caught myself wondering.

Rehme noticed my wrinkled brow and attempted to explain. “The region has lately been too hot for traditional crops to grow. Perhaps that’s why taxes have lately been such a heavy burden for them.”

“So that’s why our income here is down, then?” The terrible sight numbed my tongue for a moment. But it was only for a moment, as I soon forced myself to move on. “In other words, we must find another way to make money than via agriculture.”

But how? It wouldn’t be easy by any means. No one had the faintest clue. Even with my previous life’s memories, I didn’t possess any superpowers.

“My lady...” Rehme looked at me with concern.

“I’m fine. Now, let’s go meet the mayor.”

I told the driver to wait at the entrance to the village, and the five of us proceeded on foot. The mayor’s house didn’t immediately stand out to me. It was nearly identical to all the other houses. When we arrived, I couldn’t help but think, *Wait, this is it?*

It was, at least, slightly bigger than the average.

“Welcome! You honor us by traveling to our remote village.”

The moment we arrived, we were welcomed and invited inside. That said, there was no reception room, so we entered the living room like members of the household. The mayor had been born and raised in this village, just like all the other residents. The only thing unique about him would be his ability to move around despite his advanced age and crooked back. He showed me to a chair, and I sat. The rest of my group stood behind me save for Dida, who was outside standing guard.

“Now, my lady, what brings you here?”

He politely got right to the chase. Did he ask because the duke’s own daughter was visiting him? Or was I the first government official to ever visit his village? In the former case, I wasn’t worried; in the latter, I feared that would mean this land had been abandoned for a long time.

And, as governors of this duchy, the responsibility for this error would be on my family.

“I’m conducting an inspection of the duchy. Naturally, I had to make my way out here as well.”

“I see... Still, to be visited by such a key figure... How many years has it been since we last saw one of your status?”

So, it was as I feared... I suppressed my urge to sigh. “Good mayor, I noticed there aren’t many young people, specifically men, in your village. Why is that?”

“Ah, you see, the young men have all moved away in order to find work. Many second and third sons follow this path. They have no education, so most of them enlist with the army.”

“I see.”

“There’s little farmland here, so there’s really no other option.” The mayor smiled sadly.

“And have you experienced animal attacks from the forest?”

“Every now and again, but they’re never very large, so we manage.”

“Hm.”

The army was supposed to be in charge of keeping the peace, but perhaps because they had to cover the entire duchy, they couldn’t spare the men to protect such a small village. Protecting our borders was a very important job and inevitably outweighed the plight of these villagers.

“Thank you for sharing. Would it be all right for me to tour the village?”

“Oh, let me guide you—”

“That’s quite all right. You just go about your day, sir.”

And so, I left the mayor’s house.

According to the mayor, this place lacked many things: money, workers, doctors, and education. As I toured the village, my inspection

only reinforced his report.

Second, we explored outside the village. The fields, as Rehme described, were hardly flourishing due to the rough climate. The villagers seemed to have given up and looked at me with exhausted expressions.

Third, we investigated the nearby forest. According to Rehme, there were several fruits unique to this location. Dida took the lead, followed by me and Tanya, and tailed by Rehme and Lyle. The trees were a deep green, and the fruits were of a subtropical variety. I suggested selling them, but Rehme warned that their exotic nature could make them unpopular at open market.

“This place sure has a lot of stuff I’ve never seen before.” Dida picked the fruits one by one and examined them. “Oh! What’s this, Rehme?”

He stuck a bumpy, yellow mass in her face. It was slightly bigger than Dida’s own large hand, and somewhat familiar...

“It’s called cacao,” said Rehme, “and—”

I froze, then cut off Rehme mid-explanation and grabbed Dida by the hand, drawing close to study the object in his hand. “Brilliant work, Dida!”

I was so excited that I nearly tackled him, but Dida caught me without trouble. Unfortunately, the cacao fruit flew out of his hand in the process.

“Whoa! Pr-Princess?”

“Very, very good! That’s it! If we have that... Oh, Rehme!”

I asked her if she’d ever heard of a certain product. She looked back at me blankly and sheepishly admitted that she hadn’t.

“Wonderful! I know what we must do now. First, let’s buy this cacao.”

It took some work to convince the villagers to take my money, but eventually, I managed to buy the cacao fruit. We left the village with as much as we could possibly carry.

“My lady, are you sure about this?”

“Hm? About what?”

“Um, this cacao... It’s the least popular of all the unpopular

southern products, you know.”

“That’s fine. They’re exactly what I need,” I said confidently.

Though she acquiesced, her expression said clearly that she didn’t understand. It would be difficult to convince everyone of what I wanted to do, so upon seeing her doubt, I resolved to make it first—that would be proof enough.

After departing the southern village, we began heading east. To the east was a town that faced the sea—a town that made most of its money from trading at the port, providing solid income for us. The road there was as bumpy as ever, and the endless swaying was exhausting. The one saving grace was that this area was peaceful, so we experienced no bandit attacks.

The trip was too long to make in a single day, so we stopped at inns as we made our way there. The closer we got to the eastern town, the livelier the scenery got. The heat subsided as well, and we started to smell the sea on the air. Finally, we made it to the duchy’s easternmost town.

“Wow... I’ve never actually seen the sea before!”

Rehme, seated across from me, gazed at the water with sparkles in her eyes. I’d seen the sea plenty of times in my previous life, but I was still excited internally. And as expected of a port town, the streets were filled with boisterous people coming and going.

“You there, girl! Don’t just stand there! Out of the way!”

As I stood in the middle of the street, glancing about, a man shouted at me. I looked his direction to see a massive pile of goods barreling toward me.

“My lady, look out!”

In my panic, I froze, but Lyle pulled me out of the way with such force that the world became a blur. In the next moment, I was embraced, and Lyle’s chest was right in my face. It was firm and burly, a testament to all his training. My nose pressed up against his breastbone, causing me a bit of pain.

“Thanks, Lyle.” I raised my head and thanked him, pulling away. It wouldn’t do to remain in this position forever.

“No, I’m just glad you’re safe. My lady, please don’t go off on your own. Have Tanya or someone accompany you.”

“Right, I will. I’ve had enough frights for one day.”

Just like at the southern village, I went to speak to the mayor. Their home, as expected of such an affluent town, stood out from the rest. Their reception was perfect as well, as if they were used to dealing with people from the government coming for inspection. They did, however, seem surprised by the fact that I, the duke’s daughter, had come herself. After this brief stop, our group of five set out to explore.

“This place really is lively.”

What seemed to be the main street was crowded with people and a large number of booming businesses. Stalls were squeezed tightly together as literal tons of goods passed through, people weaving in between.

“Indeed. This area’s income is quite steady due to its trading and salt exports.”

With the inspection as a pretext, I took the opportunity to browse the various stalls. Unsurprisingly for a port town, a number of rare goods were for sale—for example, various trinkets clearly of foreign make and fish that could only be found near the sea. I wanted many of them for myself, but my mind was constantly thinking about the possible markets, if only distribution could be managed. Honestly, it was incredibly fun—a grand puzzle.

However, just as I’d examined every inch of the main street, I noticed an alley off to the side. Upon closer inspection, it appeared abandoned. The alley was dark, and the buildings seemed lonely. Trash dotted the ground. It was such a stark difference from the bustling main street. From a distance, it seemed like an entirely different town encroaching upon this one. I stepped toward the alley, but Dida grabbed my hand and stopped me.

“Princess, not that way.”

His manner of speaking was the same as always, but there was an odd gravity to his tone.

“But such places are exactly what I came to inspect.”

“As your guards, we’re not here just to protect you when you’re already in danger. It’s also our job to keep you from ever getting into it.”

Was he implying the alley was really that dangerous? Still...

“I have you, Lyle, and Tanya with me. Is that not safe enough?”

“It’s not. I’m getting a bad vibe from this place. If things get out of hand, I’m honestly not confident we have the numbers to make it out safely.”

My eyes widened with shock. Lyle and Dida were the strongest members of our mansion’s private guards. They had even been scouted for the royal knights, the bona fide cream of the crop. And yet he was uncertain?

Dida noted my suspicion and pressed his argument. “Places like that run on different rules from the rest of the world, and the people who deal in dark corners have no mercy for those who break those rules. A few of them would be one thing, but if we ran afoul of an organization, we’d stand no chance, not with just us. Go in unprepared and you’ll get more than burned. Besides, I doubt anyone will take kindly to *you* intruding, Princess.”

There wasn’t much I could say to counter that. His emphasis on *me* made me think it wasn’t just a matter of physical strength either. Not only did I have no achievements to my name, I also didn’t really know anything about my domain yet. In other words, he was saying my title in itself wouldn’t impress them.

“All right... I’ll give up, for now.”

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

“Let’s take a break and get lunch, shall we?” I suggested in an effort to change the mood.

Instantly, the darkness cleared from my friends’ eyes.

“Oh! In that case, I have a place in mind.”

The change was most dramatic in Dida. His normal, bright attitude returned, and we entered a restaurant at his recommendation. Lyle and Tanya protested at first, saying I shouldn’t visit such a common business, but I silenced them. We’d come so far that of course I wanted to try the local specialties. And so, as expected of a port town, a fish dish appeared before me. Raw.

“Oh, my... It looks delicious.”

I nearly drooled. My heart screamed with nostalgia. Fish had proven to be a terribly rare occurrence at my dinner table, let alone anything raw. For someone like me, whose heart was half born and raised in Japan, a country surrounded by the sea, there was no greater delicacy.

“Raw food...”

“My lady, let’s not.”

Lyle and Tanya showed hesitation over the raw factor, while right next to them, Dida chowed down.

“Ugh... I’ve read about this in books. The locals here have a practice of eating raw fish. And it comes with a dipping sauce that’s made from beans, I think... Is that what this brown stuff is?” Rehme fearfully brought the food to her mouth and then put it down, over and over.

“It’s good, you know.” I dug in without hesitation. And indeed, it was beautifully tasty. Had to be the freshness.

“Oh! Got a taste for it, eh, Princess?” Dida was on the job, so I was sure he wasn’t drunk, yet he still spoke like an inebriated old man.

It made me chuckle. “There’s no need to force yourselves, but why don’t you try it?” I beseeched the rest. “You might like it.”

At this, my friends grimaced, and each popped a piece into their mouths, looking like they were prepared for death. Lyle and Tanya quickly grew accustomed to the raw texture and began to enjoy themselves. Rehme, however, couldn’t get over the fishy smell and gave up halfway through.

“I guess there are some experiences you just can’t get from a book...”

Beautiful words, perhaps, but unfortunately the trauma of raw fish brought her to tears. It was quite the pathetic picture.

With lunch over, we returned to the port. This time, we perched atop a hill and viewed the entire port below us.

“One day...” I murmured as I looked out at the scenery. “One day, I want to expand this port. Expand our trading. And that way, connect to the whole world via this port. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?”

Everyone smiled.

“It would indeed, Princess. Bring me some foreign wine while you’re at it.”

“Watch your tone, Dida! Yes, my lady, that sounds wonderful.”

“All right, Dida. You better be excited when that day comes. And Lyle, what would you want?”

“I suppose if I really had to pick something, I’d like to see other countries’ armor and weapons.”

“I should have expected as much. What about you, Rehme?”

“Books from other countries, of course.”

I should have expected that, as well. I couldn’t help but laugh. “And you, Tanya?”

“Well...if there are any rare tea leaves out there, I’d love for you to try them, my lady.”

“I’d be happy to enjoy them with you, Tanya.” I turned my back to them and looked at the port again. I burned the sight into my memory. “It was the right decision to take this trip. I was able to see so many things I’d never even heard of before, and I learned a great deal.”

The documents Sebastian had prepared for me were great, and an excellent textbook for someone like me who knew nothing about the duchy. I learned many things from them, of course. But observing reality teaches you something else. I also felt that, thanks to this trip, I’d found true motivation to inform my governance.

“Everyone, I have to ask you again. Will you follow me? Not on a journey like this one, of course. I mean, will you give me your everything?”

Tanya was the first to respond. “You already had my everything, my lady.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Sure will, Princess. It’s always fun by your side.”

Lyle and Dida agreed, smiling.

“Quite. I’m sure exciting things will happen if I stick with you.”
Rehme answered last, with a smile on her face.

“Thank you, everyone.”

That night, we took rooms in an inn along the main street and rested up. Tanya was always in charge of our bookings, and she’d never steered us wrong. That aside, I should have been exhausted, yet for some odd reason the gears in my brain kept turning and I couldn’t sleep. We had plans early in the morning, so I needed to rest...but it was no use.

I sighed and got out of bed. Perhaps I’d ask Tanya to get me a drink. No, it would be awful of me to wake her this late at night. But there was no way I could lie back down. Unable to think of anything, I stood up and exited the room.

I realized it was quite bold of me to walk alone at night, even if it was inside an inn. The feeling like I was doing something indecorous got me excited. It was like I was a child again. I sat down on a bench and peered out at the night sky through a large window.

Suddenly, a voice came from behind me. “Princess, you shouldn’t be leaving your room at this hour.”

“Dida...”

“This is an inn, not the mansion. You’re not exactly safe here, you know.”

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t sleep.”

“Rehme said the same thing. Something about being too excited by the sea.”

“Well, that’s not my problem.” I frowned. “I’m surprised. Were you behind me this whole time?”

I hadn’t sensed anything while making my way here. I had genuinely thought I was walking alone down that dark, quiet corridor.

“Of course. Even in an inn, Lyle and I take turns keeping watch. It just happened to be my turn. If Lyle or Tanya found out I’d let you wander off alone, they’d kill me. Although, I’m guessing Tanya would have sensed me slacking off, so you wouldn’t have been alone either way.”

“I see... Well, I apologize again for the trouble.”

"I don't mind. You could call it a perk of the job, getting to see you before I go to sleep." He chuckled.

"Say, Dida..."

"Hm?"

"Remember that alley you stopped us from going down?"

Dida looked away awkwardly. "Oh, that."

"You seemed quite informed... Why is that?"

Dida studied me. His usual aloofness was gone. His eyes seemed to reflect nothing, and it started to unnerve me.

"I'm not suggesting you have any connection to the people there. I don't suspect you. I just thought you seemed wise to the subject. And because I know nothing about it, I wanted to hear more." I continued, but Dida made no real response. What was up with him? The silence that had been so comforting a few seconds ago was now strangling—painful.

Abruptly, he spoke. "Me and everyone else, we lived in the slums before you took us in. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"There, no matter what happens, no one will come to save you. You have to fend for yourself. Not even children are spared."

"I...see."

"Which is why my nose is leagues better than the average person's at sniffing out danger. If you know there's danger, you can protect yourself better, right?" He was speaking like himself, but his tone was entirely serious. "But...I was an idiot back then. I knew there was danger, but I was a fool... So I got close to a certain kind of folk and acted like their errand boy. Ah, your father and Sebastian know about this, so don't feel like I'm sharing anything you'd have to keep secret."

He might as well have read my mind. They knew, huh? Perhaps it wouldn't have been right for me to say, seeing as I was the one who insisted we take Dida in, but given this, I'm surprised they allowed me to.

"Anyway. That's probably why I seem...savvy."

"This may sound like a very foolish question, but...why did you run errands for those people?"

Dida chuckled, a lonely smile on his lips. “For the most common reason of all: money. I regretted it real quick, though. Powerless kids are nothing more than disposable pawns to the likes of them. Dozens of kids just like me up and vanished. By the time I realized the danger, it was too late. Trying to cut ties that early would have been suicide.”

“Thus, ‘Princess’...?”

“Huh?”

I’d always wondered why he called me that. If it was a joke, he was certainly determined to stick with it. I’d also given him permission to call me what he liked, and I had no desire for him to revere me. Perhaps it was his way of saying I grew up comfortably, swaddled in silk. A way to make fun of me for being someone who saw nothing, heard nothing, and knew nothing.

“It’s nothing. Forgive the strange question.”

“The reason I call you ‘Princess’...is because you’re a princess.” He muttered, then grinned.

“Huh?”

“Oh? Did I make you curious?” His grin became gleeful as he cocked his head and approached me. It was quite obvious he was teasing me.

“Step away from her.”

Tanya’s voice cut the air like a knife. Dida doubled over, holding his head. She had hit him, and it made the most remarkable sound.

“Honestly. I thought you were going to bring her back to her room, but you took so long I had to come check on things myself. My lady, it is late. You must leave early tomorrow morning, so it’s important you sleep.”

“Right... I, ah, think I’m getting a bit sleepy now. Tanya, I’m sorry for making you come fetch me.”

“It’s perfectly fine. Give me any order you wish. Shall I prepare some warm milk to help you sleep?”

“Yes, please. And Dida, thanks.”

And so, my mini-adventure—ahem, my walk through the inn—came to an end. I drank the hot milk Tanya brought me and felt the sandman tug at my eyelids. The rest of that night, I slept like a baby.

“Would you like a drink, too?” Tanya quietly offered a cup to the man in front of the door—Dida.

“I always knew you were the caring type. Poured some for me too, did you?” Dida took the cup happily and sipped.

“In your dreams. Why would I give you hot milk to drink, when it’s your job to stay awake and protect our lady? It’s just boiled water.”

“Oh... Well, I had a feeling.” Dida grinned wryly.

“It’s not like you to look so sullen.”

“Yeah?”

Dida drank the water, still smiling. Tanya studied him in silence.

“The princess asked me why I call her that,” he admitted.

“Oh, I see,” Tanya said dispassionately.

“That was cold, Tanya. You started this conversation, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but your response was so dull. Besides, I doubt you’re that hung up about it.”

“You got me. The princess thinks I’m making fun of her for being naive, and that’s true. But that’s not all...”

“Indeed. I believe it was the first time you saw her? You said she was ‘like a princess in a story, so kind, soft, and beautiful.’”

To Tanya and Dida, someone like a duke’s daughter was a being from a different dimension. Under normal circumstances, their paths should never have crossed. But by some twist of fate, she had taken in these forsaken children, and now they lived together. It had been such a shock to realize such a world existed, that such people existed.

Dida, with his hard, scarred heart, had been no exception. There had been shock...and at the same time, jealousy. How could they be so different? Why was she showing him her world? He thought these things soon after being taken in by the duke’s family. He even started to resent Iris for being showered with the world’s fortunes, for knowing nothing of debasement.

Yet he also envied her purity. She was like a character from a

storybook. That someone like her could smile at him, value him, need him, when he was no more than a pawn and worth less than pennies, was mind-blowing. It was nice. As time passed, he realized his place was at her side. He imprinted on her; she was his mistress.

“Just tell her. ‘It’s because you’re as cute and kind as a storybook princess.’ It’s not like you have an ulterior motive. Or are you embarrassed to voice the thoughts of a naive child now that you’re an adult?”

“Sure, I could say it. You, Lyle, Rehme, and the others are always going on and on about how much you love her straight to her face.”

Dida was right. All Iris’s little brood had sworn unending loyalty to her. Only Dida, hardest to read, acted aloof, hiding his true feelings in smoke. Was he truly loyal?

“Can’t you say it another way?” Tanya sighed.

“I’m not wrong, though.”

“Well, I suppose.”

“I don’t call her ‘Princess’ for any deep abiding reason. But she seems to get caught up in it, mull it over. It makes her examine her own shortcomings, which makes her even greater.”

Dida grinned brightly, the brightest one so far. Tanya sighed internally, realizing he meant well.

“Everyone expresses their love for her without reservation and does their best to make her desires come true,” he said. “That’s why I figure a guy like me is important. Someone unreadable, whom she can’t quite figure out. Someone to make the princess stop in her tracks and think.”

“What a troublesome personality you have.”

“I’m cynical.”

“Same difference.”

Dida shrugged. “Maybe I’ll tell her the real reason once I retire.”

Tanya sniffed. “Well, then she’ll need to live a long life in order to hear your true feelings.”

“What? Really?”

“We both know you’re never going to retire on your own. And it’s

even less likely our lady will ask you to leave her service.”

“Perhaps.” However, Dida laughed both out loud and in his heart.

Tanya once again raised her fist above his head. “Quiet. What if you wake her?”

“Ow! Tanya, you hit too hard.”

“Not true at all. Now, I must be going.”

“Yeah, yeah... Oh, Tanya.”

“What?”

“When did I ever tell you the real reason I think she’s a princess?”

“Long ago, when you were completely in your cups. Until then, I was convinced you were insulting her. I’d even fancied eliminating you on occasion.”

“Whoa...”

“Keep your smoke and mirrors to a minimum, lest you forget your true feelings.”

“Don’t worry, that’s not happening. There’s one thing I’ll never let go of.”

Dida smiled. Tanya also smiled for once, for she knew of what he spoke. The one thing Dida would never let go of—in other words, that which was most important to him. For all of them, that was their mistress, Iris. It was the most convincing argument anyone could put before Tanya. After she closed the door, Dida went back to his post as if nothing had happened, aloof as ever.

And so, with the month I’d asked for over, my final task was to meet Moneda. Although, to be honest, this meeting would be my first real obstacle.

A receptionist led us into the merchant guild’s receiving room. The merchant guild with which Moneda was affiliated was, quite literally, an organization made up of a collection of people who made their livelihoods off mercantile work. You could think of it as similar to a union. Branches of the merchant guild were found all over the

country, unbound by local laws, and existed as a single entity. However, each of these branches had its own flavor, so to speak, so it was difficult to say if unconditionally categorizing them all as the same entity was truly correct. Essentially, a central headquarters sent out messages to the branches and dictated shared rules, but it was up to the discretion of each branch on how to implement them. It was quite similar to the relationship between the king and his governors.

The building of the merchant guild's branch office struck me as both calm and oddly profound, the diametric opposite of the grandiose, flashy designs favored by the nobility. You could say that only a certain sort of person would recognize its true value.

"It's good to see you again, Lady Iris." A refined young man with glasses entered the room after us. Unfortunately, his smile seemed like nothing more than a lie to me.

"And you, Moneda. Oh, don't trouble yourself with formalities. I'm here incognito."

"I'm sorry, but custom dictates."

"Of course... You always were a stickler for these things."

"So, what is it you want?" He got right to the point.

He wasn't even going to bother reminiscing pleasantly about the past, eh? Nothing had changed, then.



“Oh, Moneda, don’t be like that. It really has been a long time. How are things lately?” I asked.

“How are things? Quite fine.”

“Good. I should have expected as much of the guild’s vice-treasurer. I assume you also know of the most recent developments in my life, as well?”

“You got me.” Moneda gave me a wry smile. Merchants were, in my experience, uniquely able to acquire all the latest rumors and up-to-date information. Naturally, they kept close track of the nobility, their biggest spenders.

“As you know, then, due to recent events, I’ve returned to the duchy. Incidentally, Moneda, how is the guild doing lately?”

“Fine, as well.”

“Oh, really? I heard your trade with the royal capital has slipped quite precipitously.”

His calm expression froze over. I could hardly hide my smile at the sudden change.

“Now, now. If you let your emotions show, you’ll have people fishing in your pockets before long.” I gave a stately chuckle to try and ease the tension in the room, but Moneda’s expression remained stiff. “Moneda, I’m sorry. It was just a hunch. But it seems trade has indeed slowed between our duchy and the royal capital, then.”

When the state of the capital was uncertain, of course trade declined. When selling to nobles, it wasn’t rare for a merchant to visit their estate and bargain directly. In fact, this was the most typical method. But these visitations brought risks. If a merchant grew too friendly with a client, that noble’s enemies would begin to suspect and avoid their business, which no merchant would desire.

Yet, the recent trade decline was still only just barely visible. Only those who stared at ledgers every day could have seen it.

Oh, but I really didn’t have any proof as yet. This was a bluff, and nothing more. But with the world in such a moment of change and being so difficult to predict, it was smarter to be careful. If I were a merchant, that’s how I would conduct my affairs.

“You got me again,” said Moneda slowly. “Just for my reference, what gave you reason to suspect?”

“It’s a natural supposition, if you only consider present conditions. That said, Moneda, I didn’t come here to tease you.”

“Then what is it you want?”

We were back on topic, except this time there was something different in the air. When we first started speaking, we had been on equal ground, or perhaps you could have said he had the initiative. Now, however, he recognized that I had the upper hand. Perhaps it was a sign he would listen to my request.

“Moneda, would you like to move even greater sums of money?”

“Are you trying to hire me?”

“Yes. But not as an employee of the duke’s family. I want you to serve the duchy.”

“What does that mean?” he asked cautiously.

“I’m planning to reform the way this territory is run. Separating the government from my family will be part of that. In other words, I want you to manage the territorial budget and commerce.”

“Why would you want *me* for that? It’s not like your family is lacking in human resources.”

“Because you know the lay of the land. And because in the mid-to-long term, an incredible social revolution is bound to take place. Thus, I have no need to cleave to common conventions. Of course, I do require my men to be of some quality—which you, as a young vice-treasurer, have proved you possess in spades. Most of all, I trust you. And is there anything that requires greater trust than moving money?”

“Ha ha ha! A majestic plan you have there. If you mean it, the duchy should become quite an exciting place in the future. Pardon my asking, but do you have the authority to appoint me to such a position?”

Ah, he didn’t trust me. Perhaps he thought this was my father’s idea, and I was just the messenger. Or that I was trying to poach his talents as a means of making a name for myself. It was time to play my

final card.

“Of course. I was appointed acting governor, you see.” I passed Moneda the letter of appointment I had been given by my father upon my departure. There had been no public announcement regarding my new service. I didn’t plan to make one, either. It seemed more effective to deploy the news in important situations like this.

Moneda stared at the letter in shock, as if unable to believe its contents. Not only had my father bequeathed all his duties to me, but my rank was also now equivalent to that of a feudal lord’s, believe it or not. Basically, no matter what my father and brother now said, I was in a position to simply push through their arguments as I saw fit. These essential points were explicitly written in the letter, so it was no wonder Moneda was shocked. I still couldn’t say what my father had been thinking. However, it was proving quite useful, so I was at least grateful.

“Thank you very much.” Moneda carefully resealed the letter.

“So, what do you say?” I asked.

“I happily accept.”

“That was quick. I thought you’d consider it a bit longer.”

“The ability to make quick decisions is an important part of being a merchant.”

“Well, I’m grateful.” I smiled. “So, I’d like to discuss the future in more detail. When can you come to the estate?”

“Please give me three days. I’ll need to hand over all of my current responsibilities.”

“Excellent. Then we shall expect to see you on the morning of the fourth.”

“As you wish.”

Ah, that was a weight off my shoulders. I had secured Moneda by my side, and I had three days to confirm details with Sebastian. With that out of the way, my group left and at last returned home.

Moneda watched Iris from the window as she exited the merchant guild. On his face was a smile.

The merchant guild brought merchants together, hired personnel, mediated between members, and so forth. All merchants were required to join the guild, and the guild ate up as much of their money as it could in the form of taxes in exchange for protection and the like.

As vice-treasurer, Moneda's job was to manage the taxes the merchants paid to the guild, as well as the funds for the guild's management. It was a busy job, but he enjoyed the challenge. Life was fulfilling, until the return of Iris Lana Armelia. The daughter to the lord of Armelia had taken him in as an orphan off the streets, just as she had a handful of others.

Honestly, at first, he'd considered her return an annoyance. He was grateful to Iris, of course, but work was a different matter; he never mixed business with private affairs. He knew, thanks to his contacts, that Iris had returned because of a broken engagement, and he couldn't imagine she would call on him for anything but some supremely bothersome request.

How wrong he had been.

"Oh, really? I heard your trade with the royal capital has slipped quite precipitously."

He never could have imagined her saying such a thing—let alone figuring it out herself. A handful of people could tell, of course, but only if they studied the ledgers every day. The Iris that Moneda knew did no such thing. She spent her days in the royal capital surrounded by noble sons and daughters. There was no way such words could come from her coddled mouth.

Now, he knew better. If he underestimated Iris, he'd be eaten alive. A nervous energy had come over Moneda, like he was facing a frontline veteran of many battles. He had been too slow. She had already taken the advantage. Even when he accepted his first loss and tried to retake the field, she revealed her request like a perfectly timed strike. He could only lament his loss in that regard.

But the shock of his defeat was nothing compared to the shock of her request. Reform the government? In the mid-to-long term? He could hardly believe his own ears.

Interesting, he'd thought. If Iris had suggested the same thing in

the years past, he would have called it a pipe dream. But today, she made it all too clear it was something she could pursue because, against all odds, she had the power to do so.

This was not just an outlandish idea. Iris was acting governor, and this was no dream. She had the ability to appoint people to office. There was nothing else to discuss. From here, things would move quickly. He had accepted the job.

As Iris left, Moneda went to prepare his underlings to take over his responsibilities. What sort of scheme would Iris suggest when they next met? He couldn't wait to hear it.

My meeting with Moneda over, I finally returned home. No place like it! For a moment, perhaps.

As I went over the documents Sebastian had given me, Sei knocked on the study door and entered. "Pardon me."

"Oh, Sei. Yes, what is it?"

Sei was my footman and one of the other orphans I'd taken in. His job involved making his master's requests reality, as well as assisting the butlers.

"I've brought more documents for you from Sebastian. If you can find the time, please read over them."

His reply made me chuckle. "Sei, there's no need to be so formal."

"My lady, I..." Sei tried to say something but then sighed, his face falling in disappointment. "It doesn't suit me, does it?"

"No, you're just a bit too tense. You have to relax, or you'll make the other party nervous as well."

Sei had always been an adorable boy. He was a bit introverted and scatterbrained, but his smile was wonderful. I hadn't seen him in ages, since he had to stay behind while I went off to the academy. Perhaps that was why when we were reunited earlier, I was so shocked.

He really had changed. They say time does that to people, but I couldn't help but feel like something was out of place. It was as if he'd grown cold, or oddly stiff. At first, I thought he was trying to distance

himself from me, his disgraced mistress, but he treated Tanya and the others similarly, so that wasn't it. Even Tanya was surprised.

Upon further investigation, I was told it was because he was training to take Sebastian's role once the man retired—the impeccable butler, his skills perfect in every way. And that was no exaggeration. I could understand why Sei would set Sebastian as his ultimate role model. But he was so focused on his training that it made his persona a bit uncomfortable for everyone around him.

“Why don't you try easing up? If you're always so tense, you'll make your coworkers nervous. And that's just exhausting for everyone involved.”

Either way, everything in moderation, right? While I did believe it was important to have some sense of focus and urgency during work hours, if you overdid it, you could lose sight of what was around you and make basic mistakes. I had a tendency to forget my surroundings too, so perhaps it wasn't my place to lecture him, but I repeated the words a friend had said to me in a previous life regardless.

“Thank you for the advice.” Sei smiled ruefully and bowed, then left the room.

Was I just being meddlesome?

I sighed and went to look over the documents Sei had brought when again there was a knock at the door. This time, Sebastian entered.

“Pardon me. I have more documents for you, on top of the ones I sent with Sei.”

Sebastian placed the papers on my desk. They were reports on the villages surrounding the southernmost village I had visited, as well as on the eastern port town and its neighbors.

“Ah, thank you.” I flipped through them, scanning as I went. “By the way, Sebastian...”

“Yes, my lady?”

“How has Sei been lately?”

“Unfortunately, I am not privy to his private life.”

"I wouldn't ask you about that. I'm talking about at work."

"Has he made a mistake?"

"Not at all. From where I stand, he's doing his job just fine. But he seems so oddly wound up. I know he's on the clock, and it's important to have some focus. It just feels like he's forcing himself."

Perhaps I'm being selfish in wishing he could remain as I knew him, I added in my mind. I grinned in self-chastisement. I really was selfish. Nothing stayed the same forever. Maybe I had just hoped to come home and see everyone just as they were, to be reassured that some things wouldn't change. How unbelievable, after what happened in the capital.

Was that my problem? Was I looking only to relish my memories, clinging to the past?

However, Sebastian nodded. "You aren't mistaken. Sei is certainly pushing himself in some respects."

"You think so, too?"

"Yes. There was a change in him a little before you came home. Or maybe it's more accurate to say he endeavored to change?"

"Why would that be?"

"He's worked at the estate for a good while, so it's been decided that he should be promoted to butler."

"I see..." I nodded thoughtfully.

"There is quite a difference between a footman and a butler. A footman's job is to follow their master's orders, while a butler ensures their master lives a carefree life, working to fulfill their master's needs without ever receiving instructions. Furthermore, as part of their duties, a butler must manage the other servants' activities and give them orders. In your family's case, I am here, so Sei would not need to manage the estate or the mansion. However, he would be required to give orders to the other servants, to which he seems as yet unaccustomed. Thus, Sei seems to be under the impression that the first step is to be an exemplary servant."

"Uh huh..."

"He says he wishes to be a butler like myself, which is flattering. But there's no need for him to change so immediately. You might think I'm tooting my own horn, but it took me decades of experience to get

where I am. Thus, it's only natural that he can't immediately replicate my demeanor."

That was true enough. Sebastian managed the duchy of Armelia, the estate, and our servants. He was my father's right-hand man and an irreplaceable resource. But as he said, it had taken him a long time to master it all.

"Sebastian, do you think Sei has the right stuff to be a butler in your mold?"

"That is for you, his future mistress, to decide. But I would never promote someone with no promise."

"Hee hee... You're right. So what Sei needs is experience, huh?"

Giving orders and managing daily schedules so work goes smoothly... Now that I think about it, a butler's job really is tough. I smiled. "Thank you, Sebastian. You can go back to your work."

He bowed and took his leave.

Chapter 3: The Duke's Daughter Runs the Show

THREE DAYS PASSED in the blink of an eye, and as promised, Moneda came knocking on our gate. Thus began our first official meeting. First on the agenda: ensuring my inner circle understood my ideas.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming today. Let’s begin the meeting.”

The people in this room were those I trusted most—in other words, those who had accompanied me on my trip, plus Moneda, Sebastian, and Sei.

“First, allow me to lay out my thoughts. This past month I’ve toured the duchy and had Sebastian fact-check observations for me, and it’s come to my attention that, compared to other territories, ours is quite wealthy.”

Our harvests were bountiful, thanks to the everlasting spring that came with our southerly position, and facing the sea meant we also did well in trade. It was no mistake to call us the second royal capital.

“But the reality of what I saw is this: Our duchy is like a ripe fruit. It’s currently in an edible state, but soon it will rot.”

Everyone around me blinked as if in surprise—Sebastian and Sei, especially.

“Wealth gathers with the wealthy, giving the poor no chance to ascend. The shops lack brand-new wares, leading to stagnation.”

As someone who had lived in the capitalist country of Japan, I was a believer in economic competition. I could admit, however, that a certain amount of wealth tended to pool at the top, which couldn’t be helped. But this land was different. There was zero competition. Those on top of the socioeconomic order, save for in extraordinary situations, could never be unseated, and there was zero chance for social mobility among those at the bottom.

“If a country’s citizens are poor, you cannot call the country rich.”

That was the gist of it. A limited market would inevitably decline.

In other words, if we didn't increase the citizens' wealth and revitalize the economy, I believed the duchy would eventually slide into decay. I looked about the room to see many of my coterie with questions in their eyes.

"The simplest way to explain what I'm saying is...I want to create a land where children never have to suffer as you all did."

This, they understood. They smiled grimly and nodded.

"That's the major goal, anyway. In order to secure not just our present but our future, we must increase the overall quality of our people's lives. For that to happen, there are a number of reforms I'd like to institute. First, there must be a clear distinction between the ducal family's fortunes and the government's funds. Then a bank must be established, the government centralized, the tax system revised, the highways maintained, education made compulsory—"

"Um, what's a bank?" Sei hesitantly interrupted.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got so excited that I skipped some things. Regarding the bank, I'd like to have Sebastian and Moneda oversee that, and I'll explain the concept in more detail later. But before it can become reality, we must create a system where my family can sustain itself without relying on taxes from its people."

"In other words, you're suggesting taxes be used to fund the government while the money to maintain the duke's household is garnered from another source?"

"Exactly, Moneda."

"What exactly did you have in mind?"

"First, we'll start a business."

At that word, the air in the room froze.

"A business, you say?" said Sebastian.

He and Sei were against this, I could tell. Their expressions were a bit clouded.

Moneda was also against this. "It is often the case that a noble house will attempt to change course only to hasten its decline. In my opinion, you should avoid such actions."

But if we didn't find a way to generate more income, my ideas would be nothing but hot air. The mansion's upkeep, my needlessly

fancy clothes, the indulgent food... We could cut some of these out of the future budget; I would, after all, much rather use the funds allocated for these things on maintaining public roads. The thing was, if I wanted to maintain the power of the Almeria family name, it would be impossible to tighten the purse strings too much. Thus, I needed to start a business. I had, fortunately, found the perfect product with which to do so on my travels.

“Now, now, Moneda. Are you going to stop me before even hearing what I have to say? There might be significant profit in it for you.”

Moneda looked at me suspiciously.

“But what do I know? I’m just a noble’s daughter. I’ve never stood on that battlefield of merchants, the marketplace, so of course you’d be opposed if I suddenly suggested such a thing.”

“No... That was presumptuous of me.”

“No matter.” I smiled. “So, for the time being, this is what I’d like to sell. Rehme, would you?”

“Yes, my lady.” Rehme produced a brown bean from a bag.

“What is this?”

Sebastian and Sei studied the mysterious object, having apparently never seen one before. Those who had been with me on my journey, however, mumbled, “Ah, *those*.”

“This comes from a fruit called cacao,” I said. “It grows in hot, southern climates. The locals will sometimes grind it into a paste and drink it.”

Yes, cacao. The duchy stretched from the north to the south, so while the capital city enjoyed a perpetual spring, the southernmost tip had a subtropical climate. These conditions allowed cacao to grow near the southernmost village.

“I’ve heard of it,” said Moneda. “But isn’t it too bitter to enjoy?”

I figured Moneda would have some knowledge of it from his time with the guild. That said, I had been surprised Rehme recognized it during our trip. She really did know everything—even the process the locals used to turn the beans into a drink. Talk about shocking.

“So as I suspected, no one’s turned it into a marketable product.

Thank you for easing my mind, Moneda.”

“R-right...” he said, with an expression that seemed to say, *You want to sell this? How can you say that with such confidence?*

But I *was* confident. No matter what anyone said, desserts were important to nobles. What else was teatime for?

“Tanya, open the door.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Tanya opened the door to reveal our family’s chef, Merida. She was another orphan I’d taken in. Tanya, Lyle, Dida, Moneda, Rehme, Sei, and Merida—these were my seven precious friends. Long ago, Merida had expressed an interest in cooking, which had led to her becoming our family chef. She cooked all my meals at the estate, and even though I had lately made a lot of requests due to my diet, she executed them with amazing skill. She was a truly gifted cook.

“This is a dessert made from cacao that I had Merida devise.”

What she revealed was, of course, chocolate. Quite an everyday thing from my point of view, but everyone else stared in bewilderment.

“Try some.”

They fearfully placed the unknown brown tablets into their mouths.

“It’s...delicious!”

But with every bite, they unanimously sang its praises. I tried one as well. It was obviously lacking in comparison to the mass-produced products of my memories, but nothing like it existed in this world, so it was fine as-is. I only had a vague understanding of how chocolate was made from cacao beans, so it had taken a lot of trial and error on Merida’s part to get it right. It required a lot more sugar than I’d realized, and I vividly remembered taste testing her experiments with excitement despite my diet.

“And this is made from cacao? Yes, this just might... How do you imagine pricing it?”

“It’s difficult to make and uses sugar, so I plan to set the price point a bit high. My target demographic is the nobility, and I intend to use high-quality ingredients to help it sell. Eventually, I’ll produce lower-quality versions to sell at a more amenable price so that more

people can enjoy it. Merida, show them the others.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The first thing I’d showed them were plain milk chocolate bars. Next, I showed them dark chocolate bars, ganache, and truffles.

“These are also made from cacao beans, but the taste is completely different. Try them.”

This time, everyone dug in without much hesitation.

“Wow, it’s so good! I love these round ones!”

“I prefer the bitter kind. Much easier to eat.”

Everyone’s favorites varied. Overall, however, the products seemed to rate highly, which was a relief.

“As you can see, the cacao can be cooked in many forms. So, Moneda? What’s your opinion, as our insider with the merchant guild?”

“It’s a totally new product...” he murmured. “But if the marketing is good, it should take off immediately. I believe it has incredible appeal. And you already have a clear initial demographic in mind.”

“Thank you.” I glanced sideways. “So, Sei, you will be my hands and feet. It’s up to you to build up a market for my products.”

Sei’s eyes went wide for a moment. “...Me? My apologies, but wouldn’t Moneda be more suited to this role?”

“Moneda is going to be busy setting up the bank, as I said before. It will involve negotiating with the merchant guild soon enough, so it’s a better position for him. Plus, with the nobility as our key demographic for this product, you’ll be the perfect man for the job. You’ve served our family so well for years.”

Perhaps this was a bit of a detour on Sei’s path to becoming a butler. But if it was experience he needed, then putting him in charge of a business where he would have to give orders and secure sales would be good for him, right?

Sei gathered himself. “Understood. I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations.”



“Good. This product will be our main starting point for the launch of our greater corporation. First, Sebastian: Draw up a contract with the village that cultivates the cacao. Lyle and Dida, I want you two to sort out how many people you’ll need to secure the road between that village and this estate and keep it maintained, then report back to me. You remember the state it was in during our trip, yes?”

“Yes, my lady. We’ll get right on it.”

Sebastian, Lyle, and Dida rose from their seats.

“Merida, cook up some more of these test products. I’ll come see you later to share more recipes I’ve thought of. And Tanya, I need to write a letter to Mother.”

“Your mother?”

“Yes. There’s no one better at advertising than her. If I ask, she’ll surely add these desserts to her tea parties and spread the word about them to her friends.”

“Understood.”

“Moneda, prepare the documents to register this corporation with the guild. And bring Sei with you. If you can, secure a larger kitchen for us to make these desserts. For the next three months, I want to prioritize getting this business off the ground. I realize I’m asking a lot of you two, but could you help with that as well?”

“Of course,” said Moneda. “I could never pass up such an intriguing opportunity.”

“Thank you. Rehme, I have a few questions I need answered, so could you stay behind? I’d like to review the average price of similar and related products at the market.”

“Of course. Ask me anything—I have it all memorized, especially from the last fifteen years.”

“Perfect. Well, everyone, you have your tasks. If any problems arise, please be sure to come to me so we can discuss them.”

And that was how my company, the Azuta Corporation, began.

Supported by talented people working wonders in their fields, our products were ready for sale in the blink of an eye. My mother was also surprisingly supportive of the test batch I sent her and immediately brought samples to her tea parties or gave them away as gifts. In no time at all, the nobility could talk of nothing but chocolate. We were drowning in requests and orders; business was booming.

Hooray for knowledge from my previous life!

Moneda suggested we escalate to mass production, but I rejected the proposal. Because our demographic was ultimately the nobility, I believed it was better to keep the product rare to add value, rather than to recklessly try and expand. Also, in an effort to solidify our brand image, I implemented a new policy: We printed every chocolate and box with a lily insignia. We had to be prepared for competition. For now, though, none had yet surfaced.

In addition to the product line for nobles, we had also begun work on the less high-end version. However, because it would still be a quality product, I was searching for cafés that could serve it as a chocolate cream in crepes or on dipped fruits. I'd already secured one location as well as the supply chain, so it would be open for business soon.

Sei was constantly running around, always busy. He still came off a bit stiff but not nearly as much as before. The workload had blown away all his previous nervous energy, or so I liked to believe. That said, I wasn't sitting back and relaxing either. Now that the corporation was off the ground, I was preparing to revolutionize the government while still managing the Azuta Corporation's operations.

My schedule was crazy, but it was a bit nostalgic. It had been like this in my previous life, too. Enough reminiscing—it was time to move on to my first bit of business: a meeting with Sei.

"The documents in your hands speak for themselves," he said.

"The noble line is as popular as ever, isn't it? How are we on hiring employees?"

"Rest assured on that front as well. Many chefs are coming to us, thanks to the novelty. Now that chocolate's so popular, they want to learn how to make it."

"I see... In that case, please introduce the mandatory vacation system we discussed previously. I've also spoken to Merida, and the

person who passes her test will be entrusted with the first shop selling our second line of chocolates. Could you arrange a meeting so she can inform me of her choice?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Furthermore, I'd like to move away from dealing exclusively with the royal capital and transport our products to other cities. For that, we'll need trade routes and personnel... Why not start up our own shipping department, then? Tanya, get me Rehme and Moneda."

Tanya quickly summoned them.

"Moneda, how does a merchant normally go about securing trade routes?" I asked.

"Well, smaller and mid-sized merchant companies often transport their own goods. For larger ones, they either hire guards and transport it themselves, or get underlings to take care of it."

"In that case, a shipping department could prove valuable. Rehme, get me a map and point out the flattest, most weather-stable roads, please. Then calculate the time it will take to reach each territory. Speak to Lyle to see how many guards we would need and incorporate that into the projected costs."

"Yes, ma'am! What are you thinking now?"

"Ways to advance the current transportation industry, you could say. I'll write my plan on paper later, and then we can look at the costs and see if it's feasible. Now, Sei, get to writing a draft of that employment system we discussed earlier and arrange things with Merida. Rehme, I need that map. Tanya, call Sebastian for me, would you? And Moneda, stay here. Let's iron out the details on this bank."

Amazingly, they all instantly picked up my rapid-fire orders and got to work. I probably needed to think about hiring more assistants. The corporation was expanding slowly, but there was a clear lack of staff. Sei would likely collapse at this rate. It just wasn't going well for him. But I had other things to worry about.

"Okay, Moneda. How far did we get regarding banks last time?"

"The adjustment of the cost of goods, the centralization of funds, and the creation of trust, my lady."

Now that I was starting to focus on reforming the duchy's government, I'd also started educating Moneda on the theory of banks.

Currently, money flowed through the marketplace, but there was no mechanism to control it. Also—and this was something I found most surprising—the commoners either stored their money in dressers or left it with the merchant guild. I was told the guild had a convenient system in which the money one left with one branch could be withdrawn from any other. However, because these transactions weren't the guild's main focus, they got no more complicated.

“So, any questions so far?”

“No. I find myself quite surprised you thought up something like this, though.”

Well, technically I hadn't. I refrained from saying so, however, and passed the comment off with a smile. “For the moment, I'll need you to purchase a building to be used as our bank. Then, in the next few days, use my name at the merchant guild to get the guildmaster and your old mentor to agree to a meeting with their most important members.”

“Understood.”

My next few weeks were filled with the business of establishing a bank. Acquiring a building, furnishings... There was so much to do.

Then the day of the meeting arrived. The location: the Armelia branch of the merchant guild. I was reminded of how grave I'd thought the building back when I met Moneda there.

“Everyone, thank you all for making time in your busy schedules to see me.” I started with a greeting. Everyone here had their schedules planned down to the second, so I truly was grateful they'd gathered to meet me.

“No, no. We're excited to meet the president of the corporation that's been the talk of the town lately.” The guildmaster's eyes glinted sharply.

I-I should have expected this... The pressure's jacked up to the max. I smiled blithely, hiding my anxiety. “I'm here today not as the president of the Azuta Corporation but as the acting governor of Armelia.”

“Oh ho... Acting governor, you say?”

“Yes. If it weren't for my position, I doubt I would have been able to entice you all here. My company is yet a fledgling.”

“Oh, you're too humble. I've heard many tales of your exploits,”

said Moneda's mentor.

"My... I'll take that as a compliment, then. Now, to the topic at hand..." The air froze. Ugh, I was scared to open my mouth. If I messed up a single word, I was done for. "First, I've established a regional bank, and I'd be delighted if you all would use it."

"A bank?" The guildmaster frowned.

"Yes."

"Forgive me, but what is that?"

"Put simply, it's an evolution of the finance division the merchant guild currently operates. It fulfills three main jobs: depositing, drafting, and granting loans."

"Depositing...? And did you say loans? I've never heard of such things... What do you mean?"

Now the ball was in my court again. I smiled. "Let me explain what I mean by deposits first. In the past, the merchant guild's finance division has accepted money from businesses and individuals alike to keep safe. The bank would handle this for you. This would free up the budget you'd previously allocated to hire security. A boon for you, no? Furthermore, the bank would be able to handle transactions between separate accounts. This is what I mean by a draft. For example, if two parties have money deposited in the bank, and one wishes to pay the other, the bank may transfer the appropriate sum, and no one need walk around with their money vulnerable."

Depositing would work just like it did in Japan. You created an account and then used it. There was no standard ID system here, though, which would make withdrawing difficult at a branch other than the one that held the documents used in setting up the account. With that in mind, business-focused checking accounts would help circumvent the ID issues. It was also common for people to move to the countryside, in which case we could also offer bank checks or bills as proxy funds in case there was no nearby institution. Or, since I was considering starting a census, I could use that as an opportunity to create IDs for everyone. On the back of every ID would be a personal stamp to be used as proof of authenticity. There would be no need to copy *everything* from Japan, after all... That said, these were just my rambling thoughts at the moment. I could refine the system later.

A census would take a great deal of time to organize, though. It

could always be initiated after the bank was established—or much later. Regarding the stamp, since this world had no kanji, maybe it would need to be crests like the nobility used. I'd have to ask Moneda for more details, like how things had identity checks and so forth had been conducted until now.

Drafting, meanwhile, would work the same as in Japan, with transfers only possible at the branch where the account was set up at. There was no system for that, either. Perhaps, separate from the client's deposits, the bank could also hold on to their ledgers and use those to resolve any snarls? It would have to be expensive as it would involve handling fees, so likely only certain types of people would start such an account.

Incidentally, I intended to hire all the people who currently called themselves security guards for the merchant guild. A bank needs security, and if I was going to start a shipping department, well, I'd have plenty of work to provide. Of course, they'd have to be trained hard by my family's excellent guard company first, otherwise their skill levels would be all over the place. That would be a solid initial investment.

"I see," said the guildmaster thoughtfully. "But is this really safe? The funds you'd be handling are precious. There can be no hint of risk."

"Of course. They will be placed under the protection of House Armelia. I can guarantee the quality of the guards we employ. If by the slimmest chance someone does attempt funny business, they will be swiftly dealt with."

"Hm. And this loans business?" said Moneda's mentor.

"Loans will be provided from the bank's gathered capital. Basically, it's a gift of money that must be paid back in turn. Naturally, this will come with strict conditions. But if you ever find yourself in need of money for a new business, the bank can provide those funds."

"That sounds interesting."

"You can deposit money with the bank whenever, and you only need withdraw the amount you require. Transactions will be made easier across the entire populace. Also, you will be able to borrow money whenever you need it. Because the bank's funds will be guaranteed by my house, as long as we don't go under, our vast wealth will cover all financial risks. What do you say? Of course, as governor,

I'll make sure to pass on the profits to you. After all, I am infringing on your domain."

That said, the most I could do was insure their faith in the bank. I couldn't make any direct investments in the businesses of the people in front of me, not with the money paid to my house through taxes. In fact, if my corporation hadn't succeeded, I would have been forced to use almost all the tax money on maintaining the duke's estate, as per usual. Fortunately, I could now invest it in this new public service. All in all, it was not necessarily a mistake to say my corporation was paying the dividends.

"What do you want from us in return?"

"In regard to establishing the bank, nothing. All I want is for the flow of money within the duchy to improve. Oh, but would it be all right to take all your financial officers with me to the bank? There will be a lot for them to memorize, and this way I can be assured of their skills. Also, I'm in the process of preparing the bank's main office, but I haven't gotten to branch offices yet, so I'd be ever so grateful if you could lend me a section from each of your guild's branch offices in which to do business."

"Sounds simple enough. Not only are you providing the initial investment, you're also offering to take over a debt-ridden division of our guild. We'll gladly help you out."

Yes! Things were looking good for the bank.

"On to the next subject, then. Perhaps the main subject, for you businessmen."

The air that had relaxed once again tensed up. Of course this wasn't the end. I'd gone to the trouble of getting all these busy people together. It would be an incredible waste to not say more.

"Related to the bank we discussed earlier, I've decided that the taxes paid by the duchy's people are to be used to maintain the duchy's roads, as well as the establishment of another academy."

"An...academy? Like the one in the royal capital?"

I frowned. "I would never waste taxpayer money on a social hub under the guise of an 'academy.' What I want to create is a place of learning, with entry-level classes that teach reading and writing, all the way up to higher education on specialized subjects. Citizens will be

required to take the entry-level classes, which will be founded using taxpayer money. What I want you all to engage with, however, is the higher education.”

“Engage how?” asked one merchant.

“Speaking frankly, I want you to invest,” I said. “Money is fine, but I will also gratefully accept donations of furniture and materials.”

“Why don’t you just ask for a ‘loan’ from this ‘bank’?” another merchant asked.

“Trust in the bank is held up by my family’s money and the duchy’s taxes. An excessive loan would destroy the balance of deposits to expenditures, and it would be a quick way to demolish the bank’s finances.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” said the guildmaster. “So, all you want is for us to support the creation of this new academy?”

“I want to open it as soon as possible,” I confirmed. “The people of this duchy are a vital, precious resource to my family. It would be such a waste to not polish them until they shine.”

“Hm. Care to share any more specific details on this academy?”

“Please examine the documents you’re about to be handed.”

My companion, Sebastian, distributed the papers to everyone. I’d been preparing them for the past several weeks. Thanks to that, I’d hardly had time to even sleep.

“First, the greatest offering will be the medical classes. I’m also considering classes on governing and finance.”

“Medical...classes?”

The businessmen all looked at me in surprise. I’d expected as much. In this world, doctors were retainers to royalty and the nobility, and they treated patients in their homes. Their knowledge wasn’t widely shared. But every businessman realized the value of that knowledge.

Normally, no one would ever sacrifice a hefty paycheck to reveal trade secrets. Key word: normally. Even I was shocked I’d managed to hire the people I had. I’d thought I’d have a cozy group of two or three of my family’s doctors to start with, but somehow, my mother heard about my plans and pulled some strings. She was startlingly connected.

Suddenly, I had doctors showing up who wanted to take it easy in the countryside, or who were thinking about training a successor, and they had quickly accepted the jobs. One day, I hoped to get my mother to use her powers of negotiation in the business world as well.

I'd also brought on researchers and farmers to teach agriculture. Study and practicum, you know? My parents used their connections to the fullest in order to entice the many scholars I now employed. I also hoped that Rehme would consider being a teacher.

"But doctors are so valuable because of their rarity. If their population increased, wouldn't their value decrease?"

"What are you saying? There aren't even enough to go around now."

Commoners could visit a town doctor if they lived in a town. These doctors weren't properly educated, however, and their work could hardly be counted on. The surrounding areas, however, didn't even have access to such quacks. It wasn't uncommon for the countryside to be totally reliant on shady mystics for their cures.

The southern village I'd visited on my trip had exactly this problem. Some of the church's missionaries provided checkups for free to the poor, but their skills were no better than those of snake oil salesmen. The doctors worth their salt tended to stay in towns. Worryingly, charity missions also seemed to be in decline.

But back to the topic at hand.

"I'm not talking about mass production. But if we can create an environment where common folk are able to visit a doctor, then surely companies that handle doctor's tools and develop medicine stand to make a profit. Also, if researchers can develop new treatments, then medical companies can expect even bigger profits."

The businessmen in these fields began to fidget before my eyes. Good. I'd caught their attention.

"Meanwhile, classes on governing and finance—especially the financial ones—would train people in order to better Armelia's future. You all have some investment in this, don't you?"

"I can understand the governing classes, but how do the finance classes impact us?"

"Please turn to page three of your booklets."

Gasps popped up around the room.

“My word...”

“This is an excerpt from the Azuta Corporation’s ledgers.”

“This is a ledger?!”

Everyone stuck their noses in the pages.

Would you believe there was no such thing as double-entry bookkeeping in this world? It was so convenient! How had this even been possible? Some say it was one of humanity’s greatest creations.

What was even more unbelievable was that there was no unified system, either. One company might use single-entry bookkeeping, while another used transfer memos and separate merchandise accounts. It was chaos. If I wanted to push a capitalist society, this couldn’t last.

“This way, you can easily see what goes in and what goes out. And over here is what is called a balance sheet, where you can easily determine your assets, debt, and net income, as well as an income statement, which displays earnings and costs. With these, you have a quantitative review of a company.”

There was nothing wrong with steering the ship based on a merchant’s instincts and experience, but considering what was to come, it was best to standardize things now. Although, I would be lying if I said I didn’t yearn for greater clarity in part because of my previous life’s job in finance.

“When you accept a loan from the bank, you’ll be required to submit this document. But most of all, once the tax system is reformed and the poll tax is gone, you’ll use your ledger to accurately report how your profits have gone up in order to pay your taxes accordingly. If you employ a clever tax expert, you’ll be able to condense your assets and reduce your taxes. I think this should be a great help to all of you.”

“You have the authority to reform the tax system...?”

“I do. I’m not just the acting governor. As is written in this document, my authority shall be equal to the feudal lord’s in regard to governance of the duchy until the day I step down.”

“And if one enters this academy you want to start, one can learn this form of bookkeeping you use?”

My feeling had been that if these merchants were smart, they’d

realize the value in doing things my way. And it seemed I was right.
“Yes, of course.”

The merchants sighed greatly upon hearing this.

“Good heavens... The carrot is great, but so is the whip...”

“Indeed,” I smiled. “But there are other treats to consider as well. For example, in the agriculture classes, I’m planning to have research done on our vegetables and grains in order to improve our local produce. Once that’s done, I’m willing to give exclusive rights to any developments to the companies who invest today. Well? Sounds tasty, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, yes. Tasty indeed.”

“The rest of this conversation is reserved only for those companies that wish to invest. I wouldn’t want to waste anyone’s time if they don’t intend to be involved.”

Only two people stood up at my suggestion. Oh, my. I had been sure about half the room would leave.

“A lot of you are still here,” I said after the dissenters left. “I hate to ask, but are you sure?”

“Lady Iris, the people you see before you are proud to be the cream of the crop,” said the guildmaster. “The potential for great profit naturally comes with perilous risk. It’s our job to use our brains to determine the risk-return ratio and make appropriate decisions. But most of all, when presented with the possibility of such enormous profits, only a fool would let the opportunity slip by.”

“Ah... You have a point.”

“If you were just some idle noble’s daughter, I’d cast this aside as a pipe dream. But you’ve already started a successful corporation and brought it to our level in such a short span of time... No, you’ve outpaced us. Thus, we’re betting on your skills.”

“And I couldn’t be more proud of you all,” I said. “Not only are you the cream of the crop, you’re also helping to elevate our land.”

I smiled, the joy rising in me unfettered.

“Lady Iris...you have guts, that’s for sure,” Moneda said on the carriage ride home. It was just me, him, and Sebastian in the carriage. Outside, Dida sat with the driver.

“Hey, now. I was quite nervous, you know.”

“It didn’t look that way at all. In fact, I had no idea you were going in there to hold a business negotiation with those men.”

“Then why did you think I requested for you to summon them?” I asked.

“Well, to announce the bank’s establishment.”

“And I did that.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying...”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. I really had been nervous the whole time, like I was walking atop a tightrope. I’d taken a full three weeks to prepare those booklets, packing them to the gills with information. This was an entirely new enterprise, after all. My mind had raced, wondering what questions they might have or interjections they might make.

“But honestly, why *don’t* you use a bank loan to start the academy? You could delay the road maintenance.”

“Distribution is an integral part of commerce. If the flow of goods is great, then the flow of money will naturally follow. In that case, solving the road problem first and using the business to spread wealth to the people means it will become easier for children to attend the academy.”

Of course, the entry levels would be completely free. However, I didn’t expect that alone to get workers to happily attend. The problem was amplified in more rural environments—some would find it too difficult to physically attend the academy. In that case, using a public works project like road construction to get money into the countryside and stimulate the rural economy would be a worthwhile compensation.

“Those businessmen were smart. They realized that road maintenance was one of the carrots. With that, trade will improve, and during construction, necessary tools and food for the road workers will need to be supplied. Depending on their industries, their pockets should swell immensely. And with those swollen pockets, they’ll invest, earn favor with the ducal family, and secure rights to new products in development. That’s how I baited them. I just had to be strong enough

to hold my ground and not be eaten alive.”

“My lady, you thought that far ahead?” Moneda murmured.

“What, did you think I’d put no thought into this?”

“No, I’d never suggest that.”

“Really? Then, Moneda, as soon as we get back, I want you to begin operations at the bank headquarters. The paperwork will be just as we planned. Also, secure the funding for road maintenance. I hate to break it to you, but don’t expect any breaks any time soon. It’s going to be quite busy.”

“I could hope for nothing more.”

“Same to you, Sebastian. Discuss with Rehme and decide on the order of construction, then plan out a more efficient road system. Also, estimate the costs of construction and prepare an application to the appropriate authorities.”

“As you wish. I have already spoken to Ms. Rehme and finished estimating the costs. All that’s left to do is submit the application.”

“I should have known, Sebastian. Submit it to me, and I’ll look over it immediately. If everything is in order, I’ll pass it on to Moneda and we can get started right away.”

Sebastian watched Iris, her fists clenched and body tense.

His family had served House Armelia for generations, and he’d been entrusted with taking care of his master’s estate as well as governing the duchy in his stead. Because Armelia’s lands were so vast and bountiful, it wasn’t that difficult a task.

But once Iris became acting governor, that peaceful life had been turned on its head. In a word, life was busy. Busy, busy, busy. He’d always managed all his duties in tandem, to the point that his fellow servants often asked him if he ever slept. In the face of Iris’s workload, however, he couldn’t help but be overwhelmed.

When she’d first returned home, he’d assumed she’d push all her duties off onto him. Yet the first thing she did was request him to submit financial and government reports. She had subsequently read

through them at amazing speed and then went on a trip to see the land for herself. After that, she started a corporation that instantly took off, and she was still firing on all cylinders trying to reform the country's systems.

When *did* she sleep? *Did* she even sleep? The amount of work she did and the precise instructions she gave out weren't just shocking; they were downright impressive. Thus, if it was for her sake, Sebastian didn't mind in the least putting his old bones to work. *It will be exciting to serve this woman and see what sort of future she brings about*, he thought.

His only worry was that lately, she seemed nigh emaciated. Even now, as he observed her as closely as he could without overstepping his bounds, he saw that her body had undergone a transformation. He'd heard her dresses had stopped fitting, requiring her to summon a tailor. She claimed she was on a diet, but this was something more. He feared it was exhaustion.

Armelia's future was, without a doubt, resting on Iris's shoulders. Day by day, her presence grew in his eyes. Sebastian had to support her so that she never stumbled. And so, quietly, he willed his fire to flare as strong as hers.

It had been about six months since the bank was established. During those six months, I had started my first public works project servicing the duchy's roads. I liked to think it was going well. At the bank, merchants had created accounts under their businesses' names and deposited money. Then their employees made personal accounts, and more and more people followed suit. The bank had, in other words, become quite a vital part of the city. As a result, Moneda was incredibly busy. His current problem was figuring out how to expand beyond our capital.

We had also secured funding for the academy, which was currently under construction. I planned to open it as soon as it was done. That said, we had prioritized the construction of the academy of higher education, so the day commoner children could all attend elementary school was still a ways off.

My workload hadn't lessened in the slightest. In fact, it was

exploding. It was possible I was overworking myself, so I rushed to find officials I could trust to take on the burden of reforming the government. I'd already had to reassign all of my family's servants involved in this endeavor to help out in other areas.

Our current branches were the *Borsa*, *Agio*, *Abitante*, *Architetto*, and *Codice*. I sat above them all as the acting governor.

Borsa was responsible for taxation, crunching the numbers on proposed budgets for the other departments and weighing the reality of their ideas, as well as distributing funds once approval was given. I was also discussing reforming our tax revenue with them.

Agio worked like the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology in Japan. They determined what was taught at the academy, calculated the costs of running it, and managed its employees.

Abitante was the branch in charge of managing the citizens. They were currently running around the duchy trying to organize a census. I was considering putting them in charge of social welfare as well.

Architetto was in charge of constructing roads and public facilities. In other words, with the great road project underway, it wasn't an overstatement to say they were the busiest branch.

Codice was, as the name implied, in charge of devising our legal code. They were currently systemizing our customs and building them into full-fledged laws.

It was time to admit I was exhausted. It was time for a bath, if nothing else.

"What is it, my lady?" Tanya asked.

"I find myself with some free time for once, so I'd like to take a bath and soak for a bit. Could you prepare one for me?"

Tanya got right down to work. She'd been so overprotective lately. Did I look that tired?

"You seem happy today," she said. "Did something happen?"

"Oh, can you tell? Hee hee, I finally got my hands on something

special.”

Six months of ceaseless work and research had finally borne fruit. And today, I got to test it out right away by having a warm bath to heal my tired soul. Ahhh, the beautiful scent of roses... I left the bath in high spirits and went to where Tanya was waiting to dress me.

“Excuse me, my lady. I need to do your hair... Oh!”

Tanya took a look at my hair and froze. Amazing, no? That girl never changed her expression, so the effect had to be quite potent.

“Your hair is so pretty... It’s like it’s shining,” she murmured. “Pardon me for asking, but how is this possible?”

“Hee hee. I used this.” I produced a small bottle. Inside, it was filled with a light-yellow liquid.

“What is this?”

“It’s called conditioner. It makes your hair softer, shinier, and more luxurious.”

Conditioner didn’t exist in this world, either. Everyone washed with soap, and that was it. Do you realize how much this had pained me? For the first three months, I had been so busy I hadn’t had time to think about it. But once I did, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Soap alone damages hair. I knew this, and it hurt to have to bear with it. My hair was a beautiful platinum, inherited from my mother, and thus the thought of damaging it stressed me out even more.

Luckily, in my old life, I had been obsessed with making my own soap, shampoo, conditioner, toner, and other such things. Less luckily, in this world, making them took too much time for me to do it regularly. If I was going to dedicate that time, I wanted to produce the ultimate product. Thus, this one was scented with the roses cultivated on my own estate.

“This is amazing, my lady...” Tanya whispered under her breath as she gazed at my hair, transfixed. As I thought, beauty products could capture people’s hearts in any world.

“Would you like some too, Tanya?”

“What? I couldn’t... Really?”

“Once the process is completed, it will be easy enough to make more.”

It had taken a long time to make the first bottle, but now that I had the recipe, it would be a breeze.

“Then perhaps a little...”

Tanya happily accepted the bottle. That made me glad. She’d helped me so much. But it didn’t end there. The female servants who saw my hair endlessly interrogated Tanya. *Is she using something special? If she is, where does she get it?*

Tanya firmly kept my secret, but when I saw this, I happily told the truth. One after another, the female servants begged me to share. Once they realized the conditioner’s effects, my merchants assured me it would sell tremendously well. Thus, the Azuta Corporation quickly started producing more. It went without saying that my workload increased.

I sent some conditioner to my mother, who apparently loved it and told everyone she knew about it. This solidified its place in the market for nobles as well as commoners, although it was a bit expensive. My mother really was an amazing PR machine. I started to secretly call her my Head of PR.

Of course, the larger my corporation grew, the more work I had to do. My number of employees also steadily increased, and they had as much authority as I could give them, but it had only been a year since we started. There was a lot I still wanted to be directly involved with, so it couldn’t be helped. I had to be careful with my health.

“Lady Iris?” Oddly enough, Sebastian called out to me in a slightly panicked tone.

“Oh, Sebastian. What is it? Wasn’t our meeting this afternoon?”

“About that. I’ve just learned that Her Grace is due to arrive this afternoon.”

“What? Mother? She didn’t mention anything in her most recent letter.”

“It is what it is. Your orders, please.”

“R-right. For now, have the servants clean the entrance hall, the

dining room, and my mother's room. I know you do that already, but go over them again. Then, change the flowers decorating the entrance hall. Roses, like the scented product I sent to her. And...for dessert, let's have our newest creation, fondant chocolate. Make sure the rest of the meal goes with it. Fondant chocolate is quite rich, so I'm thinking something refreshing."

"Understood."

"Also, let's have an herbal tea for teatime. The Azuta Corporation's tea department should be able to fill you in."

The "tea department" was a new moniker. Previously we'd had the noble department and the commoner department, but that hadn't sat right with me, especially as we were in the process of opening a tea shop for the nobility as well. To wit, our chocolates were now separated into the tea and confectionery departments.

Oh, but the noble department still existed in some capacity. The nobility loved to be treated specially, so I had introduced a membership system. I was subsequently bowled over with frenzied requests from nobles wanting to join. Only members were allowed to visit special shops set up in the royal capital and our city. There, they could view *all* of our corporation's products. In other words, not just sweets, but also the beauty products we'd started to create. The original beauty lotions that incorporated a client's favorite smell were an especially good seller.

Anyway, if my mother was coming, I needed to reschedule some appointments. Lately, Tanya had been acting as my secretary, and she was a tremendous help, but I was on my own at the moment. I rearranged my schedule. I looked at the hack job I'd made of it and thought, *I'm sorry, everyone*.

I really was sorry that their workloads had become so much heavier. Therefore, I continued working until the last minute when I was notified of her arrival, checking numbers and all that.

"Her Grace has arrived."

"Thank you, Sebastian."

I quickly headed for the entrance hall, which was even shinier than usual. I joined the servants, who surrounded me as I greeted her.

"Welcome home, ma'am," they chorused.

"Welcome home, Mother," I said.

In the doorway stood a stunning beauty with luminous platinum hair. She really was gorgeous. Called the “Flower of High Society,” she still enjoyed a great deal of admiration from other nobles and held quite some sway. For this reason, I couldn’t wish for a better Head of PR for the Azuta Corporation.

“It’s good to be home. Sorry for the sudden intrusion, Iris dear.” She was, at heart, a kind woman. And though she acted warmly with her family, she held herself quite differently in the outside world. She was the Flower of High Society, after all—the perfect noble.

“No, I’m glad to see you after so long, Mother.”

“Oh, what a darling thing to say. We haven’t had a chance to sit and talk since you came back, so I really am delighted we have this chance.”

“Are you certain we’re not keeping you out of turn? The season’s not over yet.”

“It’s fine. I’ve seen to all my official duties, and I’ve notified my close friends of my absence... Oh, I suppose I was invited to House Kataberia’s tea party, but I had no intention of going.”

That’s my mother for you, I thought to myself. House Kataberia was the house of the knight captain; my mother was clearly still angry at his son, Dorssen. He had held me down on the floor during the second prince’s dining hall “trial.” I liked to think their family’s faces were all white as sheets now. After all, my mother’s attendance greatly elevated a party’s status. Honestly, I wasn’t sure if that was entirely true, but it was what people said.

Official duties aside, when a family hosted a gathering, it was judged based on who attended. Thus, it made quite a difference if the Flower of High Society showed up...or didn’t. And even if she did attend, the hosts were left worrying about when she’d leave. If she continually left their events early, people would say they had no class. Evening balls and tea parties were a gauge of a peerage wife’s influence. Even royal events outside of official gatherings tested the queen’s pull.

In other words, my mother was a key factor even for the queen’s events. As long as she attended, no one would be rude. Seriously, her very existence was like a cheat code.

That aside, screw you, Dorssen. Maybe that made me nasty. But I wasn’t sorry.

“Oh, Iris, dear. Are you already working?” In the morning, my mother poked her head into the study where I was, indeed, working.

“I’m sorry, Mother. It’s time for breakfast, isn’t it?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’m more concerned about your health.”

“I’m fine. I haven’t taken ill, not in the least. Besides, I’m having a lot of fun.”

“Really? All right, then...” she trailed off.

“If you’d like, please eat breakfast without me,” I said. “I’m going to be here a while longer. I’ve ordered chocolate croissants today.”

“Chocolate croissants? I haven’t heard of those.”

“They’re a new Azuta creation. Flaky bread rolls with ribbons of chocolate inside.”

“Oh, that does sound delicious. But it’s not often I get this chance, so I’ll wait for you.”

“All right. I’ll do my best to finish quickly.”

Tanya deftly poured my mother some tea. The perfect secretary, that was my Tanya. I looked over each of the reports my departments had given me that morning.

Ah... Still so much to do. The road project was going well; work on the academy of higher education and the city’s elementary schools was progressing, too.

“Sebastian, this calculation is off. Get it fixed. Also, this budget application is rejected. Their estimation of funds is too optimistic. Tell them to cut it where they can. If they want to go with this number, then they’ll have to present it with evidence that will convince Architetto. Oh, speaking of Architetto, how are the town halls coming along?”

“Their mission to construct town halls across the duchy is proceeding well. Materials for both the roads and the halls can be consolidated and transported simultaneously, which will lead to overall reduction in cost and increased efficiency.”

"I want to know more. Have them submit a report to me. Also, tell Abitante to prioritize that census. I want the city done before the road project finishes. In the future, this will be our most important asset. If we want to move ahead on other jobs, then we must have this census."

"Understood."

Was that the end of the documents I was looking at? There were more I needed to take my time investigating and going over... Oh, no, there were two piles left. As I split up the rest of my work, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Pardon me." In came Sei, the man to whom I'd entrusted my corporation.

"Your Grace, Lady Iris, good morning. I've brought the Azuta Corporation morning report."

"Give it here. I'll look at it."

He placed a mound of papers on my desk. It was difficult to decide if there were a ton or a few—there were a lot of papers, but never as many as I wanted. I quickly flipped through them. Anything that looked important, I stuck a temporary label on and kept moving. Once I was all the way through, I doubled back to the labeled sections. Thank goodness I was a fast reader.

"All departments seem to be doing well, for the most part. This new product in the beauty department, though—bring me a sample later. The container, too. Also, there are several raw materials I'd like to test out. Tell the development team I'll be by later."

"If you tell me what they are, I can prepare the materials in advance."

"Really? Then here, gather the things I've written on this memo by this afternoon. And while I'm at it, I'd like to check on each store's books, so bring them to me. I'll look them over later."

"Understood."

That was enough for my morning responsibilities, I supposed.

I stood. "Mother, thank you for waiting."

"It's fine. This herbal tea really is delicious." She smiled at me brightly. I'd made her wait so long, too. She was such a kind soul.

"I'm glad you like it. It's one of my tea department's most popular items."

"Of course. I'd love to drink this at home."

"Is that so? Unfortunately, we only serve it at our tea shops at the moment."

Black tea was the main variety in this country, so when I added herbal tea to the menu as an experiment, it turned out to be a huge hit. People wanted to buy the leaves, but our production department wasn't able to keep up with demand. I'd have to think of something. Maybe I needed to visit the tea department in the afternoon.

"I see. Well, please let me know once it's available for purchase. I'll serve it at my next tea party."

"You're too kind."

That was my Head of PR for you.

And so, I had breakfast with my mother and enjoyed a leisurely teatime. It had probably been a long time since I'd experienced such peace.

"By the way, how are things at home?" I asked.

"Hm? Same as usual. *Nothing's* changed. My dumb son refuses to come home even for school break. He's probably busy trailing behind the second prince and that woman." Mother's tone grew cold toward the latter half of her report. Her beauty made the impact of her ire perfect.

"M-Mother..."

"I just want you to know, Iris, that I shall be on your side with this. I believe I also have a bone to pick with Lord Berne."

H-her tone was *ice* cold! She was totally in high society mode. That chilling smile sent a shiver up my spine.

"Honestly, if he weren't my own son, I'd have crushed him already." On her lips was a smile, but her eyes were high murderous.

You're scaring me, Mother! I hastily changed the subject. "Th-that reminds me, how are things in the capital and the palace?"

My mother sighed, and the air about her once again became gentle. Relieved, I let out the breath I'd been holding. I-I hadn't changed the subject because I was scared, okay? I was genuinely curious.

Of course, I knew what was going on with both parties to a certain extent. But the amount my mother knew was consistently mind-boggling. I knew, for example, that the first and second prince were in a deadlock in terms of vying for succession. Such was to be expected. The current king was healthy, so there was no advantage in making a big move as yet.

As for the princes... The first prince was supposedly studying abroad, but the veracity of that statement was highly suspect. It had never been officially stated *where* he went to study, after all. But he hadn't surfaced at all since he left, so I had no idea of his whereabouts. The second prince seemed to still be at the academy, but I hadn't bothered to look into him at all, so I couldn't have told you more.

After submitting his report and exiting the room, Sei went to relay Iris's instructions. He looked at the papers he held and smiled wryly for a second. His situation had changed quite a lot over the years. By some miracle, he had been rescued from the slums and now served the duke's family. Yet even all that—being brought into the household, being apprenticed to Sebastian—now seemed like distant memories.

Everything had changed once Iris became acting governor. The business, her decision to appoint him at its head... Ever since, his work as a butler had simply vanished. He'd become her eyes and mouth, holding meetings with various managers, greeting clients, and more. He was buried under the work.

Once he delivered Iris's instructions, Sei made to return to the hall he'd just left.

"Oh, Sei. Good morning."

"Good morning, Tanya."

He passed by Tanya, one of his fellow orphans. She worked as Iris's hands and feet as her handmaid, and now her secretary.

"How is it going?" she asked.

"The same as always. What about you, Tanya?"

"Same here, I suppose. By the way, do you have plans later?"

“I was going to take a small break before going to pick up our lady.”

“In that case, how about some tea?”

It wasn't every day one got an invitation to tea from Tanya, so Sei agreed and they moved to the servant break room.

“Here you are.”

Sei plopped down, and Tanya poured him a cup. It was a light yellow-green herbal tea that the corporation had been pushing lately.

“This is a lemongrass tea. It's very good for exhaustion.”

“Thank you. Let's see if it works.” Sei took a sip and let out a relaxed sigh. “It's good. Do I really look that tired?”

“No. But you are, aren't you?”

“Ha ha ha... Yeah, you're right. But how I feel isn't important. Compared to our lady...”

“I'm concerned about her, too. I haven't seen her rest at all lately.” Tanya sighed, troubled. To her, Iris was a savior. Her loyalty to Iris exceeded that of any of their fellows; if Iris asked Tanya to give her life, she gladly would. Being so extraordinarily loyal to Iris, she was especially sensitive to her lady's health and given to endless worries.

“I agree. When I see her, I realize I have to work much, much harder.”

Sei's workload had indeed blown up since Iris returned. He didn't resent her for it, however. In fact, he was excited to be invited along for the challenge of seeing just how big the corporation could grow. Most of all, seeing how hard Iris worked, he felt a natural urge to do better himself.

“You shouldn't model yourself after her. She's an addict.”

“Ha ha ha, you're too right. Oh, I should get going.”

“Our lady is speaking with Her Grace at the moment. I doubt she's been able to finish her work.”

Right, Sei silently agreed. Now the odd tea invitation made sense. Tanya was trying to be kind and give Iris more time with her mother. “I see. Then I should wait a bit longer,” he said. “Do you think it's possible Her Grace came to visit because she was worried about her daughter?”

"I suspect that's the case. Sebastian periodically sends her updates on the estate, after all," said Tanya.

Sebastian alone was entrusted with managing both Armelian estates. Even after being charged with assisting Iris in reforming the duchy, he still sent detailed reports to the duke.

"I understand that he does it for Lady Iris's sake," said Tanya. "But to me, she's more important than the duchy. I just hope she uses this chance to take a good break."

"Indeed. Oh, Tanya. Could I ask for a refill?"

"I'd be happy to."

Sei settled back into his seat. He'd go once he relaxed a bit more. It wouldn't do to interrupt Iris's rare break.

Just then, Dida popped his head into the room. "Whoa, if the two of you together ain't a sight. Haven't seen this in years."

"Long time no see, Dida."

As one of Iris's guards, Dida had been busy running all over the duchy on her orders, and as such, they hadn't been able to cross paths lightly.

"Care for some tea, Dida?"

"Is that the new tea everyone's talking about? Sure, sure." Dida studied the tea curiously, then took a sip and grinned. "Ah, that's the good stuff. I like it a lot better than plain black tea. The princess just keeps churning these new blends out, too. Amazing."

"Ha ha ha, true. By the way, Dida, what have you been up to lately?"

"Me? Patrolling the roads with the new guys Lyle's been training."

Iris had ordered the bolstering and expansion of her Safety Patrol. Lyle and Dida were in charge of training the new recruits. The duke's guards were famously skilled, so there were no better people to whom the job could be entrusted. Lyle and Dida were particularly famous for rejecting invitations to join the royal knights in favor of staying with House Armelia.

"How are the patrols going?" Sei asked.

"Pretty good, I'd say. The views are nice, too. The recruits always complain about how tough the big guy is on them, though."

“Ha ha ha, that’s a good thing. And what brings you here today?”

“The big guy called me in. No clue as to why. Been a while since I’ve been home, though. Might be all right to go a little wild. Tanya, you should come help me train.”

“No, thank you.” Tanya was actually a skilled martial artist. Apparently, she had been trained quite rigorously by Iris’s mother’s family as a child, all in the name of protecting Iris. “The techniques I trained in are for instant kills. For murder. We differ at our cores, so it wouldn’t work.”

“Ha ha ha! What a scary handmaid. You think I’d lose?”

“No, I didn’t say that. I just mean that our styles are too different.”

“Well, I guess you’re right. Oh well. Guess I’ll have to put up with the big guy again.” Dida took one last swig and then stood up. “Thanks for the tea. Later.”

“Take care,” said Tanya.

“Take care,” echoed Sei. “I think I’ll go do some work and give Lady Iris a bit more time. Excuse me.”

Sei had so many things to think about that his brain felt a bit fuzzy. But after this break, his mind was cleared, at least for the moment. *Breaks are important*, he realized. *Lady Iris needs a good break, too.*

After breakfast, I enjoyed some herbal tea with Mother. When I asked about the royal capital, her expression fell a bit.

“Things haven’t changed much there. But it’s a bit odd inside the palace.”

“Odd how?”

“That woman has grown bolder. She’s pushing things. It’s mostly all to do with that baron’s daughter, but the king shares some of the blame for becoming so cowardly after losing dear Sharia. This is why Iria and I opposed his remarriage.”

“That woman” referred to the king’s new queen, Ellia. Mother had

always seemed to dislike her. Conversely, she had been quite close with the late Queen Sharia. Iria, meanwhile, was the king's mother—in other words, the queen dowager. She was the highest-ranking woman in the kingdom. Though currently retired from political life, she spent her days in the detached palace. Her influence, however, remained significant.

Incidentally, she'd always had a soft spot for my mother. Iria thought of her like her own daughter, apparently. Despite the queen dowager's retirement from royal life, my mother still visited her.

"You said the baron's daughter is stirring the pot... I thought Queen Ellia opposed the engagement of Ms. Yuri and Prince Edward." Considering her desires for Prince Edward's ascension to the throne, I would have thought Ellia would want him to marry someone of higher status.

"That baron's daughter... What was her name again?" Mother asked.

"Yuri Neuer," I supplied.

"Ah, of course. Ms. Yuri, you see... She's quite skilled at stroking one's pride. It's no wonder that ball of vanity known as Ellia fell for her."

"Mother, you've met Ms. Yuri?"

"Yes. She seems to be doing the rounds and greeting people, so we met by chance. The moment you were out of the picture, the second prince took her on tour."

"I see..." I said. "And what did you think after meeting her?"

"What does it matter? I'm on your side, Iris. But even if I weren't, I wouldn't care to get too close to her. I simply can't deal with people who don't consider reality."

"You mean she's too optimistic?"

"No... It's hard to describe. But you never have to be near her again, so don't worry."

Mother didn't seem to want to tell me more, but now I was curious. The truth was, I'd never interacted much with Yuri, so I didn't know much about her. Well, if you didn't count what Prince Edward had told me.

“Th-then, Mother, do you know what the first prince is like?”

“Oh, have you never met him?”

“No...” I couldn’t remember him at all. If we had met, well, he was part of the royal family. I assumed I would recall.

“Prince Alfred did retreat from the public stage quite early, didn’t he?” Mother mused. “And right after that he went abroad.”

“Why so early?” This timeline seemed odd to me.

“When Sharia passed, I’m afraid a good deal happened. I’m not saying it’s his fault. He’s a wonderful person. He reminds me of your father, in fact.”

“Really?” I said, hiding my wince.

“Why, yes. Oh, but not in his looks. It’s his air—his presence. He’s still in the kingdom, you know. Maybe you’ll meet him one day.”

“I see, he’s in the kingdom...” I froze. “Wait, what?!”

Wasn’t he abroad?! How did she even know that?

“Oh, you didn’t know? Well, this will be our little secret, then.” Mother smiled.

Whoa, whoa, whoa... You can’t just lay that line on me so easily! I gathered myself. “Why in the world hasn’t he revealed himself—”

“Oh, how I’ve missed you, Merry! Iris!” My grandfather flung open the door, interrupting me.

Wait, what?

“Grandfather! What are you doing here?” I gasped.

“I heard Merry had returned, so I figured it was a good time to show up.”



Gazell Daz Anderson was my mother's father, the kingdom's general, and my grandfather. The Andersons were a marquis house, but my grandfather thought the world of nobles was too stuck up, so he had joined the military instead. There, he proved to be an excellent military man and rapidly rose in the ranks. Thirty years ago, in the war with our neighboring country Tweil, he had landed a major victory with the squad he led. Thanks to that, he had been named general. Even now, the royal knights and military both respected him.

Let me explain the difference between the military and the knights. The knights essentially served as guards for the royal family and the palace. They employed only nobles, albeit lower-ranking ones, as well as men recommended by the nobility. Of those people, the ones who guarded the royal family personally were called the royal knights. They existed to be the king's shield and spear in times of trouble, so only the strongest knights were appointed to this position.

Lyle and Dida had been invited to the royal knights in part because they had trained under my grandfather. However, in the end, they had rejected that offer.

The kingdom's military deployed directly to the battlefield in times of war. As an officer, no one cared about where you came from. In times of peace, the military acted as enforcers of the peace in the capital and the kingdom in place of a police force.

Perhaps you might have guessed from my explanation, but typically, a marquis's son like my grandfather would have joined the knights. Yet bizarrely, he had opted for the military. Then again, if you took in his long, gray hair, untrimmed beard, and buff body, he did come off as more of a warrior than a noble.

Also, "Merry" was his nickname for my mother.

"Iris, you poor thing. I'm sorry it took me so long to see you." It was hard to see his expression under all that hair, but I could hear the regret and guilt in his voice.

"No! I know you're very busy. I don't mind," I assured him.

"Ha ha ha! My son's taken over as lord for me, and the kingdom's not in any immediate danger of going to war. I've got plenty of free time!"

But wasn't it true that people visited him every day, seeking his

training?

“Oh, how you’ve taken after Merry...” His eyes crinkled as he looked at me.

“H-have I?”

I’m taking after Mother? Don’t be ridiculous. The only thing we shared was our platinum hair. My eyes were a deep blue and slightly sharp, while hers were a soft aquamarine that reminded me of a spring sky.

“You don’t have to force yourself to marry,” he insisted. “You can stay at home and do whatever makes you happy. And if you ever find yourself with nowhere to go, you can always come to me.”

Ah... That would be nice. If my brother ever came back and took over the family title, I’d have nowhere to go. In that case, it would be a good idea to take my grandfather up on his offer. I could manage Azuta from anywhere, after all.

“Oh, Father. Don’t think I didn’t hear that. How would Iris ever have nowhere to go? I’d rather you take that idiot son of mine,” Mother said primly.

“Now, now. I can’t just take Berne away. That would put Louis in a bind.”

“Hmph. He thinks it would be fine, too.”

“Oh? Well, if you say so...”

My head started to hurt, listening to them. Berne’s head had always been in the clouds. “Is he really doing that poorly in the capital?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s doing great work. For Prince Edward, that is.” Mother’s tone began cold and grew frostier. “No, perhaps for that baron’s daughter...”

I was too scared to ask what he’d screwed up this time. In fact, I was beginning to hope he would never return home.

“Anyway, Iris, would it be all right for me to stay here for a while?” my grandfather asked.

“Of course, Grandfather,” I assured him. Then something occurred to me. “Oh, in that case, could I ask something of you?”

“What is it?”

“It’s two things, actually. First, I’ve established a new Safety Patrol under our house. I’d like for you to train the new recruits. Of course, only while you’re here.”

“Sure, that’s fine. I was hoping to play with Lyle and Dida.”

“Huh? Then did they know you were coming?”

“I only told them I was coming ‘soon.’ But they know me, so I expect they’d sensed it.”

I sighed. *Grandfather, do you ever make plans?* It was no wonder those two couldn’t have informed me in advance. He’d never given them a solid plan.

“And what’s the other thing?” he asked.

“Um...well, you see...”

“Out with it, girl.”

“Could you take me into town?” I asked.

He was so surprised that his eyes almost popped out of his skull. “I don’t mind, but...why?”

“Um...I want to walk the streets. Not exactly to observe things, but...I want to see with my own eyes the state of things, how the people live, and be surrounded by them. Thus, I’d rather go without a huge entourage. And if you’re with me, no one will complain, right?”

I had seen so much on my last trip, even if it was only to a small part of the duchy. But I didn’t just want to see things as part of some trip. I wanted to walk the streets as just another person. No carriage, no guards. On my own feet, just like in my previous life. And for that, my grandfather would be incredibly convenient.

First of all, with someone as strong as him by my side, I would be totally safe. Lyle and Dida wouldn’t be able to object. Secondly, walking with him would add to my camouflage. I hated to say it, but he really didn’t look like a noble. And thirdly, I didn’t want to force my servants to follow along with my selfish whims too often. Lyle and Dida had their own jobs to do, and I preferred they prioritized them over me. If I took the other guards, I’d need a whole battalion of them, and I’d still feel uneasy. With all that in mind, my grandfather really was the perfect man for the job.

“I’ve got no problem with that,” he said. “How about tomorrow?”

“Truly?! Thank you so much!”

Yes! My thoughts were instantly overtaken by thoughts of what I could do on this trip—I knew it was for work, but maybe I could indulge in some snacking and window shopping?

At that moment, I heard a knock at the door.

“Pardon me. Lady Iris, it’s time for your afternoon meetings.” Sei entered the room guiltily.

“Oh, is it that time already?”

“Iris, dear, don’t worry about us,” Mother assured me. “We know how this family works.”

“In that case, you two, I’ll have to excuse myself. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

I left the study, and as we walked, I listened to Sei tell me about how things had progressed since the morning. Oh, I’d have to remember to set up a strategy for selling herbal tea leaves.

“By the way, Sei, I saw Ms. Yuri’s name in your report,” I said.

“Oh, her? She applied for membership for the special shops, but I rejected her.”

“Really? Prince Edward didn’t complain?”

“I told her ‘Since you are not officially married to the prince, you currently cannot become a member. Many nobles have already applied for membership status with our corporation, many of whom outrank you and are waiting their turn.’ She seemed to accept this. The second prince complained, but in the end, she got him to step down.”

“I see... Well, as long as nothing terrible happened.”

“Honestly, I don’t understand them,” Sei sighed. “They know you run Azuta, yet they just waltz in and demand special treatment? Makes me doubt their intelligence.”

“I’m not so sure they know about me, actually. Or more like they care so little about me that the possibility never crossed their minds. I think that’s more accurate.”

Yeah, that was the feeling I got. I was a person in their past, perhaps not even significant enough to take up a corner of their memories. They were each other’s worlds, and they were blind to all else in orbit. Or perhaps the eye of a hurricane would be a more

appropriate metaphor.

“Even if they were unaware, it’s unbecoming. The second prince was ranting and raving, brandishing his title, while she was saying ‘Oh, special treatment is wrong.’ So why did you apply in the first place?”

I couldn’t help but heave a heavy sigh. “Sei, if you’re concerned about me, then know that I wouldn’t mind if you had just approved her without fuss. It’s more annoying that Prince Edward showed up and kicked one up.”

“Well, at the moment, the waitlist part really is true. When it comes her turn, I’ll be sure to conduct a thorough investigation.”

“All right, then.”

I then went with Sei to each of my meetings, and by the time we were done, the sun was setting.

Now comes my meeting with Sebastian, I thought as I wandered alone. The duke owned large tracts of land, and there were multiple structures aside from the main mansion. For instance, one of those buildings served as the Azuta Corporation’s headquarters. I forbade anyone from taking test products outside of it, so if I wanted to check on them, I had to visit the place myself. It was good exercise, and it was on the estate anyway.

As soon as I entered the study, Tanya poured me some tea.

“Tanya, could you adjust my noon appointments tomorrow?”

“Do you have other plans?”

“Yes, I’m going into the city with my grandfather.”

“With Master Gazell? That’s a good idea. I’ll open your schedule immediately.”

“Thanks.”

Everything was set. I couldn’t help but be excited for tomorrow!

In the morning, I got through my meetings, blazed through breakfast, and began getting ready. Since I would be walking through the city, I needed to wear appropriate clothes. Thus, I picked a slightly

plainer dress than normal. That said, I'd been choosing outfits based on practicality lately, so maybe it wouldn't be that different after all.

I headed to the entrance hall to wait for my grandfather where I found Tanya, dressed in a similar outfit for some reason.

"Tanya... Perhaps this is a pointless question, but why are you wearing that?" I asked.

"I will be going with you."

"But Tanya, the point of today is to walk around without a huge entourage."

"Three people is no different from two."

Well, perhaps, but even so...

"My lady, please show greater care for your safety. I will not deny that Master Gazell is strong. But on the off chance anything should happen, it would be difficult to fight and protect you at the same time. Thus, at least bring me along with you, that we might better share the responsibility."

Her earnest gaze moved my heart, and yet... "But—"

"Oh, let the girl come, Iris," said my grandfather.

"Grandfather..."

"Tanya's worried, girl. It's a master's job to pick up on and respect those feelings."

I supposed if something *did* happen to me, there would be a lot of trouble. I nodded. "I understand. Then, Grandfather, Tanya, let's go. Also, while we're outside, please call me Alice."

I insisted on this, to which they agreed. Then we left through the back gate, strolling our way into the city. Ah, the weather was so pleasant. Spring never seemed to end in Armelia, so it was neither too hot nor too cold.

The farther we got into town, the denser the crowds became. Buildings made of brown bricks lined the streets, offering a different charm than what I'd grown accustomed to in Japan. As we walked down the lively main avenue, I glanced in the various stores.

The pots out in front of a florist caught my attention, and I stopped. The purple petals were lovely. "Oh, how darling! Ma'am! What kind of flower is this?"

“Those are known as bugles,” she said. “They only bloom this time of year. Surprisingly simple to grow, too.”

“Wow... How much are they?”

“The flowering ones are a thousand bells. The seeds are five hundred bells a bag.”

“I’ll take the seeds then, please.”

“You got it. Thanks for the business.”

I paid her and received a bag. Doing my own shopping was so refreshingly fun.

“What are you going to do with those?” Grandfather asked.

“I thought I’d raise them in my study. The air seems so stifling in there, you know?”

“Ha ha ha! Girls sure pay attention to the smallest things. Fantastic!”

After walking for a bit, I realized I was hungry, so we entered a restaurant a little off the beaten path. By chance, we seemed to have stumbled on a terribly popular place, as it was nearly full.

“Welcome. Please find yourselves an empty seat,” said a waiter.

I sat in a wooden chair and looked at the menu on the wall.

“I’ll have the grilled meat special,” my grandfather said.

“Um, I’ll have the stew and bread pairing,” I said.

“I’ll have the same,” Tanya added.

The waiter left us, and I looked about the restaurant again. People were constantly coming and leaving, but the chaotic atmosphere was bright and exciting.

A different person delivered our meal. “Order up! First, the lady with the stew. Say, I don’t recognize you girls.”

“We’re here from the capital,” I said. “It’s been a while since we moved, but things have been so busy that we haven’t had a chance to poke our heads into town.”

“I see. From the capital, eh?” said the waiter.

“What do you make of this city?” I asked.

“Mm? Well, let’s see. It’s situated in a great area, about equal to

the capital. Especially lately, a lot's been changing little by little to make our lives easier."

"That's good to hear."

This made me happy. It made me feel like everything I did wasn't a waste of time after all. Honestly, sometimes I got scared. I wondered if I was doing the right thing. Of course, there wasn't necessarily a right or wrong answer, or... No, perhaps that's exactly why I sought a clear "correct" path. My decisions moved the direction of peoples' lives, and as a result, their destinies changed. Maybe I was overthinking it, but in those moments when I decided on this or that reformation, such thoughts always entered my mind.

Anyway, the dishes we ordered were delicious. I didn't think I could ever abandon this type of food. Nobles were just too finicky about what they ate. I could see why my grandfather felt that way about our whole society.

Once we were done, we exited the restaurant and resumed walking. *Maybe it's time to head home*, I thought, when two small children on the side of the road caught my eye. They were about five or six years old. One was sitting, while the other was scanning the street.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Are you sick?"

Their clothes were clean but seemed old. Their bodies were thin all over.

"We're lost." The girl who had been looking around said this to me with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, that's terrible. Did you get separated from your parents?"

"No, we live with Teacher."

If they knew where they'd come from, they wouldn't be lost in the first place. Well, this was a pickle.

"My la—Miss Alice. These two might be from the orphanage."

Tanya had just tried to say "my lady," hadn't she? But that wasn't important right now.

"The orphanage?" I asked.

"It's an establishment downtown that takes in children who have lost their parents."

"Oh, what a lovely mission. Let's take them there, for now."

My grandfather picked up the girl who had been sitting, while the other held my hand. As we walked, Tanya followed behind. The orderly cityscape soon gave way to an area that had a run-down, grimy appearance. We seemed to be going in the right direction, as the girls' eyes brightened. Once a church-like building came into view, they dashed toward it. In front of the building was a woman looking about for the children, her expression troubled. When she spotted them, her eyes went wide with surprise for a second and then tears threatened to spill from them.

"Honestly! I was so worried," she cried. "Where in the world did you disappear to?"

"We're sorry, Teacher Mina. We were exploring and got lost."

"Oh... I'm just glad you're safe." The woman they called Teacher Mina hugged the children tightly. "And who are these people?" she asked upon noticing us.

How do I answer this? I wondered, but the children spoke up first.

"They brought us here!"

"Oh! I'm terribly sorry for the trouble."

"No, it's fine," I insisted.

"I can't give you anything much as thanks, but please, have some tea."

At first I politely declined, but the children insisted on playing, so eventually I agreed. The inside of the orphanage was, just as with the outside, a bit aged. There were sections in need of repair, but every inch had been cleaned to perfection.

"Thank you so much for what you did," said Mina.

"Oh, no... In fact, I feel like I should thank you for inviting us in," I said. "Oh, forgive the late introduction. My name is Alice."

"And mine is Mina. Ms. Alice, where did you find those children?"

"On the side of the main avenue. If I had to give a location, it would be close to the Azuta Corporation."

"Ah, I knew it..." Mina sighed.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"It's shameful to admit this, but apparently the children heard

about Azuta's chocolates from somewhere. They've been insistent on trying some."

"Oh... No wonder they wandered so far away."

"They're just too energetic. I take my eyes off them for a second and they're gone."

"By the way, Mina, what brought you here to take care of these children?"

"The truth is, I was raised here as well by a sister of the Darryl Church," said Mina. "She managed this chapel. And so, I've taken in orphans just as she did. After she passed, I took over the chapel duties as well."

"I see. Pardon me for asking, but what do you do for money? I mean...when you have to feed so many people..."

"I used to use donations to the church. But I'm afraid that after the sister passed, donations slowed down."

"Oh..."

Hmm. It seemed no one in this situation was directly related to the Darryl Church. Thus, anyone who continued to donate did so exclusively with the intent to help the orphans. That said, it was unlikely Mina could simply leave and find work. Actually, this was an issue I needed to get involved with, wasn't it? I would talk to Sebastian when I got home.

"Forgive me for the troublesome topic. Please, make yourselves at home. I have to go prepare dinner." Mina bowed.

No, no, no! I couldn't impose any further! I tried to decline, but Mina swiftly disappeared. Wasn't that a bit careless, leaving a total stranger with the kids? As I looked around, thinking, I noticed my grandfather playing with the children in the yard. He did adore young people.

Wait, was he trying to train them?

Tanya was also teaching a few girls how to braid hair. She was surprisingly good at dealing with kids. Awkwardly enough, children started to congregate around me as well—both boys and girls. What would I do? Kids were cute, and I loved them, but I'd never interacted much with them.

In the end, I sat down to tell them fairy tales from Japan. The children's eyes gradually began to sparkle as they listened, causing me to get carried away after a few stories and begin acting them out. Notably, I'd never acted in my life.

Before I knew it, the crowd of children had grown. At first it had just been three, but soon there were eight. My grandfather and Tanya were also watching two children each.

Grandfather, where did you get that wooden sword? For the moment, I pushed my doubts out of my mind and continued with the storytelling. The kids playing with wooden swords seemed to be having fun, too. Perhaps they'd find the skills my grandfather imparted useful in the future. For now, I would pretend I hadn't seen anything.

This all reminded me, however—were there no picture books in this world? If there weren't, then the Azuta Corporation would have to make some. They were useful in educating children, and I could donate the proceeds.

Suddenly, shouting from outside broke my train of thought.

"I know you're in there! Get out here now!"

Wh-what?

It was a deep, masculine voice. I could hear his anger as he shouted over and over for someone to come out. The children were understandably scared, and they all shrank back. Finally, I heard a crash, and a rock came flying in through a window.

"Everyone! Are you okay?" Mina came running into the room.

"What is going on here?" Tanya asked. I sensed anger in her normally expressionless face.

"It's shameful to admit, but we're on the verge of being evicted," Mina confessed.

"Why?"

"When my predecessor passed, no one was dispatched to replace her. The Darryl Church withdrew from this area. Those men you hear are employed by the person who bought this land afterward. But we have nowhere to go if we leave, so..."

And so the conflict had led to this. Hmm. While I didn't like their methods, this other party did seem to be in the legal right. While we

were in a run-down part of the city, the chapel was still technically close to the main street, so it was in a pretty desirable location.

The shouting grew louder. I'd had enough. I stalked outside.

I heard Tanya shout at my back to stop, but I couldn't ignore this. If Tanya were to handle it, she'd beat the objectors to a pulp without a second thought, while my grandfather would likely send them running in fear with his presence alone.

Two rugged-looking men eyed me suspiciously as I approached.

"Who the hell are you?" one growled.

"I came here to worship, though it seems mass hasn't been held here for a long time," I said. "Regardless, this is still a Darryl Church. I cannot condone you throwing rocks."

"Huh? Our boss bought this place."

"Oh, my... Then it no longer belongs to the Church?"

"That's right. But it's infested with kids, so we're here to chase them out."

"I see," I nodded, as if in understanding. "But as a woman of faith, I still cannot condone such barbarity as to throw rocks at a place of worship. If your boss can prove ownership, then they ought to go to the town hall and present their deed. The appropriate measures will be taken. It's unthinkable that you would threaten powerless children with violence."

"Shut up, wench!"

"If you continue to cause a ruckus, I shall have to call the guards."

A new voice spoke then. "It's the children's fault for not leaving in the first place."

From behind the two men, another man appeared as if from out of nowhere. The two men seem to defer to him, so he had to be their superior. His clothes were of slightly higher quality, considering the area, but if he hired such men, then his true character was clear.

"I will accept that they do not have legal claim to the building," I said. "However, that doesn't excuse violence, especially against children. If you wish to insist on your claim, please, again, I urge you to visit the town hall."

"Hmph. I'm willing to ignore the rent they owe me since I bought

the deed, as long as they leave. Your way ain't worth the trouble."

His reasoning wasn't technically flawed. That said, there were too many children to just up and leave at a moment's notice. And what was this about rent?

"Or are you their payment?" he leered.

"What?" What had he just said? Not "Are you here to pay for them?" but "Are you their payment?" He thought I was being *sold*?

"Respectfully, no," I said coolly. "What sort of negotiation is that, anyway?"

"You'd fetch a high price, I bet. No, it'd be a waste to sell you right away..."

"I said you're mistaken."

"Ha! You wanna protect those kids, don't you? Everybody wins this way. The kids pay their rent, and you get to wear pretty clothes and eat tasty food. I'm rich, you see. All right, boys, take her away."

The moment one of the men reached toward me, Tanya stepped between us. She almost seemed to be moving in slow-motion. "Don't take another step toward her."

Suddenly, I noticed the small knife in her hand. It was placed at the man's neck. He stopped just a hair short of death, and a crimson line of blood dripped from his throat.

"Wh-who the hell are you?"

Her sudden appearance had completely surprised them. Eventually, they seemed to recover, and the boss snorted.

"Oh? You say violence is wrong and yet employ it yourselves?"

"Because you won't listen," I said sharply. "It's answering fire with fire. Nothing more."

I didn't quite believe myself even as I said it, but the words spilled out of my mouth. Tanya probably hadn't been able to hold herself back. Regardless, I was grateful she had saved me.

But what now? If I revealed my identity, this matter could be put to bed easily. But if I were being honest, I wanted the guards, rather than my personal retainers, to catch these crooks. It would make a good show of the guards' ability to keep the peace. My hope was that the prosecution of these individuals would deter people from trying

anything similarly shady.

“Everything okay?”

With perfect timing, my grandfather appeared. The sight of this mountain of a man drained the fire from our accosters.

“Let’s go.” Finally, the boss made a wise decision and fled along with his men.

Once they had, Tanya rounded on me. “Lady Iris! Why would you put yourself in such danger?”

“Tanya, I told you not to call me that.”

“This is no time for jokes! You really scared me. If Master Gazell hadn’t stopped me, I would have jumped in immediately...” Tanya scolded me and then turned her rare anger on my grandfather. She glared at him.

“Tanya, you were angry before I even stepped out,” I said.

“Because those fools endangered you. It’s only natural.”

“But that anger would have ended the possibility of any clear-headed discussion. And Grandfather’s presence alone would have riled them up and made things more complicated. I was the most suitable representative.”

“But—”

“My goal remains the same as it ever has been. These children are citizens that I must protect. Thus, I will never hesitate to act on their behalf.”

Tanya didn’t seem to accept my reasoning, but she at least conceded to my conviction.

“When we get back, I will bring this event up for discussion,” I said. “It is something I must get involved with on an official level, not a personal one. Now, let’s head home.”

At this, we bid goodbye to an extremely grateful Mina and her no-longer-frightened brood, then set off.

“Alice...” Just before we arrived at the main street, my grandfather suddenly called out my alias.

“What is it, Grandfather?”

“Run. Tanya, you know what to do.”

“Of course.” Tanya, in total understanding of the situation, grabbed my hand and dashed off.

“Wait, Tanya!”

“Lady Alice, please close your mouth and run.” Tanya pulled me onto the main avenue, and we headed straight for a guard station. “Please help!” she cried.

I stared at Tanya in total confusion, as I still didn’t understand what was going on.

“What’s the matter?” a guard demanded.

“We were attacked by men over in that side street. A man passing by saved us, but he’s totally outnumbered. I don’t know if he’ll make it out alive.”

Tanya was normally an expressionless sort, but right then her face did a good job of conveying fear.

Wait, attacked by men? Is that what Grandfather...?

“That’s terrible! Let’s go, men!” the guard called.

Three guards exited the station and followed us. I hated to say it, but my grandfather seemed a lot stronger than those three combined. Still, I went along with it. Tanya stuck close to me. We needed her to show us the way, and I felt a wordless pressure coming from her hand on mine saying “Don’t let go.”

I think I would have been okay if she left me at the station.

We arrived back at our original location to find a dozen men collapsed on the ground. At first, I feared they were dead, but they seemed to have been simply knocked out. In the middle of them all stood my grandfather, looking bored. He had taken out all those men that quickly? Even for him, that was impressive.

“Y-you’re... Thank you for your great work!”

The guards delivered a full salute. Ah, right, Grandfather had been training the guards yesterday and this morning, so of course they knew his face.

“Mm. I happened to see these girls being assaulted. I had them run off and defended myself. Just a bit.”

Aha. We were keeping up the act of being strangers. While the guards knew my grandfather, only those from Azuta’s research and

development department, as well as a few select ministers, knew I was the acting governor as well as the duke's daughter.

"Thank you for your help. We'll take things from here," the guards said.

"I'll leave you to it, then. Need to see these girls home," said Grandfather.

"Understood, sir."

The walk home was unremarkable. In case you were wondering, the ones who attacked us were employed by that same man from the orphanage. Apparently, he'd only retreated at first in order to call in his goons. He was also wanted for human trafficking and so was subsequently arrested. The sale of humans is forbidden in Armelia, you see, and has been for a long time, so there was no extended investigation. I didn't even have to suggest such a rule.

When I got home, I got an earful from Lyle and Dida while Grandfather laughed behind my back. Despite everything, I still wanted to walk the streets every now and again in the future. It had been fun, and quite enriching. After all, I now knew we should begin selling picture books and fairy tales for children. Once we had printed some, I sent several copies to that small church.

Of course, it went without saying that my workload once again increased. However, my goal was clearer to me now than ever before, so it was very fulfilling. There was no definite right or wrong in any one of my actions. However, I had power, and I could use it to help and protect those children. No... I could help many more people than just them. In that case, I had to devote myself to my cause and move forward. This cleared the doubts from my mind, and I tackled my work with renewed vigor. It was time to get things done!

It wasn't long after meeting those children that I used the profits from the books to establish a new, government-run orphanage. Future profits were donated there, as well.

Chapter 4:

The Duke's Daughter Faces off against Her Brother

IT HAD BEEN TWO YEARS since I received the memories of my past life. The Azuta Corporation's profits were, as ever, tremendous. Competing companies had started to crop up, but what was even more amazing was that in the span of a little over a year, my corporation had become a household name. Government reform was moving steadily along as well. The bank had also become popular, and the road work was nearly finished.

The academy's higher education courses had opened up, attracting quite a lot of students. Even the town quacks were attending the medical courses in earnest. As expected, children of merchants were attending the finance classes and learning about double-entry bookkeeping as well as basic economics. The agriculture classes were also increasing their head count, little by little.

And let's not forget the opening of the elementary school. The children from the orphanage were students there, and the last time I went to visit, they actually read *me* a picture book. Furthermore, those extortionists and human traffickers the guards arrested that day were being worked to the bone doing "hard labor." We didn't have nearly enough taxes to just let them sit in a jail cell all day.

My days passed by in a blur; the world turned, and the seeds we'd sown started to sprout. Yes, time moved on. And yet, for some reason, my mother and grandfather remained. Don't get me wrong, it was fine. Mother used her excellent taste to advise and propose ideas for the Azuta Corporation's developments, and thanks to Grandfather's training, the security force grew ever sharper.

It was fine...but it made me wonder if everything was all right with them. I mean, they had their own social circles and lives to lead. I couldn't just throw them out or anything, though. I supposed as long as they were fine with how things were too, there was nothing to worry about.

That is, until one day, when our peace finally broke.

“Mother! What is the meaning of this?!”

As I was enjoying a relaxing tea break with my mother, someone suddenly intruded: my brother, Berne. He hadn’t changed a bit since I last saw him.

Mother gave him the cold shoulder. She refused to even look at him. “Our teatime is being disturbed. Remove him.”

Oh dear, her tone had changed again. Internally, I began to sweat. The servants, overwhelmed by Mother’s intensity yet unable to lift a finger against the duke’s eldest son, wrung their hands in panic. That is, all except for Tanya. She alone stepped forward to remove my brother. Before she could, though, Berne stomped forward and opened his mouth, ready to declare war.

“Don’t try to cover this up,” he snapped. “Tell me the real reason.”

“I explained myself in my letter,” Mother said. “I’m not feeling well, so I’m spending some time in our country estate. For that reason, I simply cannot attend.”

“Hmph... Yet here you are, drinking tea. Doesn’t seem very sickly to me. And to refuse an invitation from the royal family... Are you trying to ruin my house?”

Berne probably thought he had taken an unassailable position. I could see it on his face. Unfortunately, I doubted Mother would bend so easily.

She put down her cup and shot Berne a frigid look. “You forget yourself. ‘My house’? You have not inherited the title of duke. You have no right to say such a thing.”

A powerful blow. And totally correct, to boot. Berne seemed taken aback. For a moment, his eyes narrowed in anger. “As the one who *will* inherit the title, I’m warning you because I care for the future of our duchy.”

“Hold your tongue. You, worried about the future of the duchy? Hmph. Then you must have an excellent reason for not returning home during your vacation to see your father. Surely you weren’t hanging

around the second prince and that baron's daughter, in clear dereliction of your duties."

"I—"

"Furthermore, I received permission from the queen dowager herself to absent myself from said party. Or do you think yourself so important that you can object to the decisions of royalty?"

"...!"

Yeah, I had to give this one to Mother. Besides, even if a party was held by the royal family, invitees were always free not to attend, although hardly anyone ever refused. The queen dowager tended to support my mother's wishes either way. Not even another royal would push back against her.

Mother frowned ever so slightly. "Honestly, breaking it off with my daughter and then inviting me to the engagement party for his new fiancée? Has the prince any dignity left? Not even two years later, and they're already engaged. The queen dowager expressed her deepest sympathies. She even offered the prime minister a chance to decline." The prime minister, if you'll recall, was my father. "However, I suspect he will attend due to his position. That would be more than enough of a condescension for our house."

Ah... So, the baron's daughter and Prince Edward were finally engaged? It had been almost two years since that fateful day. They were all over each other, too, so it must have been quite an ordeal to wait two years.

"Furthermore, how dare you show up and raise your voice at me? A travesty. But I suppose we know where you picked up such gross misbehavior."

Berne's face went red. Ohhh dear. I'd never seen him so mad. It had to be because of Yuri. "Mother, there are certain things even you can't be forgiven for saying."

"Heh..." Mother's expression remained hard. "So you would speak ill of your own mother as well? Just as you did your sister?"



Berne did his best to mount a counterattack, but nothing fazed Mother. Not even the second prince and his followers could slander her. The queen dowager would never allow it.

“Your actions lately have disappointed me, Berne,” Mother went on. “Your father agrees, of course. If you don’t shape up, I can’t guarantee you won’t be disinherited. Your sister is doing quite excellently as governor, so we would have nothing to fear, should it come to that.”

For the first time, she smiled at Berne. But this smile instilled fear, not happiness.

“Wouldn’t that be fortunate for you? Then you would be able to spend all your time with that baron’s daughter you so adore. Oh! But without your position, you’ll have nothing to offer her, so perhaps she’ll simply abandon you.”

“That’s...impossible,” Berne spat. “Why was Iris even appointed acting governor? As an insult to the woman who will one day be queen? She should be stripped of her titles and exiled—immediately.”

“Why, I cannot say what the future holds,” said Mother. “For now, this would-be queen of yours is but a baron’s daughter. And it is unthinkable for a mere baron’s daughter to raise a hand to a ducal house. If it weren’t for the second prince and your habitual besmirching of our family name, we would have long since crushed House Neuer with impunity.”

Huh. Here I’d thought they were holding back because of the second prince, but apparently Mother and Father had been thinking about Berne’s feelings as well. That made sense. The person they wished to punish was still dear to a member of our family, and it would be shameful to engage in a public battle with one’s own kin.

“The authority your father bestowed upon Iris makes her his equal in Armelia. Thus you, a boy not involved with the Armelian government, have no right to demand such things. We have no need of someone who not only fails to understand his own place but refuses to work for his family.”

“I don’t accept this! Let me meet with my sister.”

Uh...what? I was sitting right here. I thought he’d been ignoring me this whole time, but I supposed I was wrong. Had he even forgotten

what I looked like?

“And what would you do then? Demand she relinquish the governorship? You haven’t the right to even utter those words. Nor do you have the right to call Iris your sister.”

Mother exhaled derisively and took another sip of tea. I glanced over at Tanya and saw confusion in her eyes. She likely wondered why I wasn’t already raging about my disrespectful brother showing up and blithely throwing about news of my ex-fiancé’s engagement party.

I, too, had long thought that the moment I saw Berne I’d berate him, insult him, even slap him. But now that he was actually before me, I felt...nothing. I was just empty. At this point, he was as insignificant to me as a pebble on the side of the road. After that fateful day, we had become total strangers; I had erased his existence from my heart.

Oh, but I *did* agonize quite often about whether he might come back with his foolish notions and try to take over the duchy, and had found myself wishing he’d stay away.

“Pardon me. My lady, it’s time for your meeting with Sei.” Tanya called out to me amidst the awkwardness. Was it that time already? I hadn’t been able to relax at all, thanks to Berne’s intrusion.

“Mother, I need to leave. Please, try to enjoy your day.”

“Indeed, I will. Oh, Iris, dear, could you take this foolish son of mine away with you?”

“Huh?” She was talking about Berne, right? But why?

Mother smiled gently. “Show him how hard you work and shut his mouth for good. If he continues to complain, then you can kick him out. Tanya, I’ll expect your help if it comes to that.”

“Understood.” She’d do it without issue, too. Ah, well. I supposed I could always shoo him away if he got annoying. Whatever!

“You heard the lady,” I said in a clipped tone. “Let’s go, Berne.”

“Huh? Are you...Iris?” Berne gawked at me in disbelief. He really *had* forgotten what I looked like.

“That’s right. Who else would be taking tea with Mother? Now I’m busy, so get a move on.”

I headed directly for the study. Inside, Sei was already waiting for me. He frowned upon seeing Berne following close behind me, but he

quickly changed gears and handed me his report. I scanned through it.

“The confectionary department is dropping a bit,” I said.

“Over time, shops selling similar products have started to appear,” Sei explained. “And their price points are much lower than ours—to attract sales, apparently.”

“There’s no reason to lower our prices just for that. The consumers will continue to buy our product as long as it is of quality.”

“Some have suggested we lower what we spend on ingredients.”

“No. Even from a cost standpoint, our price is fair. Rather than lowering it and ruining our relationship with the farmers, we should maintain our relationship with them and secure quality stock.”

When managing a business, one must pursue profit. However, as governor, I didn’t want to diminish the profits of my farmers. It would be one thing if we sold our products at outrageous markups, but I believed we charged a fair price.

“Investigate whether there’s a reason other than price differential for the revenue drop. Take a look at our competitors’ products and review our own. Now, how is the progress on next week’s cake?”

“We are all set to begin distribution next week. At first we were unsure if the people would be interested in ‘birthday cakes,’ but cakes have been normalized in part thanks to the tea shops, so advertising has gone well. We’re currently drowning in orders.”

The slogan for our campaign read: “A special cake for a special day.” Namely, birthdays and wedding anniversaries. People could preorder a cake, as well as choose the shape and cream from a number of samples. They could even order decorations.

“That’s good to hear. Please inform me as to what sort of questions our customers have.”

“I have those right here.”

Sei handed me a document, and I scanned it. “Most of these seem to be about how to preorder and when we’ll start selling. Excellent. If this works, it should bring up the confectionary department’s sales a bit. How is our inventory?”

“As you instructed, we’ve lowered prices on older designs. That’s been clearing out inventory fairly well.”

"I see. Ideally, we'll have no leftovers. Continue to follow the sales numbers and lower our production so they just barely match. In particular, we'll be able to sell seasonally limited items at a premium due to scarcity."

"Understood."

"The beauty department continues to impress, I see," I murmured. "Still unable to keep up with demand for hair conditioning packs, huh?"

"Indeed. All the stores are sold out."

"Increase production slightly on all beauty products, then. How is our series expansion going?"

"With all speed on both counts, my lady. To the latter, the honey and rose series are currently on sale. Next up will be the lily and lavender series."

These "series" were a line of products like shampoo and conditioners that all included a certain item, such as honey or rose. We also sold customizable packages and containers.

"I see. Be sure to keep renewing our warning campaign. We want people to stop using these products if they happen to be allergic, and they should understand that each series will best suit a different sort of skin and body type."

"Understood."

"And bring the reports from the shops to me later—both the financial and seasonal reports. I'll look them over this evening."

Sei bowed, his obedience implicit, and then left the room.

My, Berne's been quiet, I thought, but I turned to find Tanya had gagged him with a handkerchief. Oh, dear... How long had that been going on? It surely wasn't necessary. Berne's eyes were wide, and he seemed to be in awe. I gave Tanya a look that said *Release him*, and she immediately did so, though clearly not happily.

"Are you trying to catch flies with that mouth?" I asked. "What's gotten into you?"

"Iris, you run a corporation?"

"Indeed. It was my idea and my creation, so it's only natural that I run it."

Before Berne could summon a response, there was a knock on the

study door.

“Come in,” I said.

Moneda swept in. His brow furrowed for a moment when he spotted Berne, but he promptly ignored my brother. “I have a few things I’d like to discuss,” he said. “I checked with Tanya, and she said you would be free now.”

“That I am. Now, what is it?”

“I have the price surveys for the duchy. As you can see, the price of goods is rising slightly.”

“Very slightly. Yet simultaneously, the value of currency is slowly dropping.”

“Yes. So, as to when to raise our interest rates...”

“I don’t believe that’s necessary yet. We may be seeing inflation, but only a small amount. Right now, it’s important to keep the price of goods on the streets stable. When consumption increases, companies will borrow more money from the bank to expand their businesses. If we increase our interest rates, we risk killing the momentum they worked so hard to build.”

“You have a point.”

“Hold another meeting with your people at the bank and talk this out,” I instructed. “Explain the balance as I did, and if they still wish to increase the rates, ask that they formulate a reason I can accept.”

“Understood. Thank you.”

“Um, Iris...” Berne mumbled.

“What is it?”

“The bank is that financial institution the guild recently established in Armelia, right? Why are you making decisions regarding how it’s run?”

“We have lost over ten seconds to your pointless question,” Moneda said coldly.

Well, I supposed that wasn’t entirely unwarranted.

“You think every little query of yours deserves a response?” Moneda went on. “Do a little research on your own and you’ll find the answer easily enough. It is unthinkable for a man in your position not

to know. And you say you want to succeed Duke Armelia?"

I waited for Berne to yell at Moneda for his impudence, but my friend seemed to have struck a nerve with my brother. Berne stayed silent.

"This time, just once, I'll make an exception," Moneda said once he saw Berne cowed. "It was your sister who suggested the bank and saw to its establishment. Thus, of course I come to her with questions. Now, Lady Iris, I'll take your advice to the next meeting. Is that all right?"

"Of course. I look forward to your next report."

The second Moneda left, Sebastian took his place. "My lady. I've come to summarize the latest government meeting for you."

"Yes, I've been waiting for this. How are things at Borsa?"

"They are discussing easing tariffs. The duchy's most profitable products are grain, livestock, cacao, and a variety of other fruits. However, other territories are presently unable to match our production. Furthermore, our research efforts continue to produce higher quality seeds of grain, and our stockpiles are full to bursting. Even if we did ease tariffs, they believe it wouldn't have a meaningfully detrimental effect on our economy."

"I see... And are there any merits to an easement?"

"As of now, our territory has no means of producing or refining its own metal. Therefore, Borsa believes we could see incredible benefits from being able to import metal more cheaply. We are also increasing sea trade per your instructions. Many of the products brought in by ship are fruits that cannot be grown within the duchy, and we believe selling them in our domestic market could significantly increase local profits."

"Understood. That said, we must proceed with caution. Consider the current trend of inflation as you go forward." I nodded. "All right. First, submit the minutes from the meeting on the income tax draft to me. I'll instruct you later on the right timing to introduce it."

"Understood."

"Now, as to Abitante. Once the census is complete, have them move on to a survey of landownership. I want to see who owns what and clarify property rights. Just like the census, this will be an official document that will be compiled and left to future generations, so you

must be thorough.”

“Of course. Abitante officers are presently informing the people of this survey. They have been told to explain that they are asking for your cooperation in official government business. It won’t be long until a full analysis is under way.”

“It will be quite valuable. Now, what about the operating ratios of each region’s elementary schools?”

“Quite increased, my lady. Attendance is free, after all. There are still regions where a school hasn’t yet been opened, which will likely be an issue in the future.”

“Have Architetto look into it. What about textbooks?”

“They’ve been divided into multiple levels. However, children from ages seven to twelve attend the same classes, and officials are discussing separating them by age and level of knowledge.”

“Excellent. Make the age of admittance universally seven. Regular attendance will allow a student to advance one academic year. Although, could they introduce a system of tests at the start and end of each year, and allow especially well read or gifted students to pass into higher levels?”

“I will suggest that right away.”

“All right, then just summarize the income tax draft meeting for me. Oh, right. Mother’s instructed me to show Berne my work. Take him with you to Borsa and have him consolidate the tax yields from each region.”

It was exhausting having daggers glared into my back. I wanted Berne out of my study already. Besides, he had always been the top scorer in all his classes at the academy. He was more than capable of simple calculations.

“Get going, Berne. Put the number one brain at the academy to good use,” I said.

“Of course...” He rose unsteadily and followed Sebastian, the life gone from his eyes.

Ah, I could finally relax.

“Are you sure about this?” Tanya asked as she poured me tea.

“Sure about what?”

“Involving that man in governmental affairs.”

“It’s fine. We’re not here to withhold information. Besides, even a deluded sycophant should be able to add and subtract. Sebastian will be with him, too, and he should catch any funny business. Obviously, I know I can’t show my brother much of Azuta... Ah, perhaps that’s why Sei only reported previously publicized information.”

Berne was my brother, but I trusted him barely as far as I could throw him. For that reason, I wouldn’t let him touch my corporation. However, the motto for my version of Armelian government was “transparent service.” Save for military matters and some other state secrets, we took no pains to conceal information from the public.

“Plus, Lyle will be here soon. His security force’s business is sensitive information. If my brother happened to leak anything Lyle had to say to the second prince or his entourage, it might cause trouble. I was looking for an excuse to get Berne out of the way.”

“Indeed. I should have expected as much from you, my lady.”

With all my meetings done for the day, all that was left was to settle in and check through my documents. I didn’t feel like eating dinner with my brother, and I was particularly busy, so I had Tanya bring me something light. She and Mother didn’t say anything, but they surely knew how I felt. Outside, it was dark, and the room was dimly lit by the light of my lamp. I really needed to start wearing glasses. Lately, as sad as it was to admit, writing had started to appear a bit fuzzy. I supposed it was to be expected after all the staring I did at pages and pages of tiny handwriting.

Someone knocked at the door, and I bid them enter. To my inward dismay, it was Berne.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

“You’re still working?” he asked.

“Yes, as you can see.”

“Is your schedule always like this?”

“It’s lightened a little since Mother and Grandfather came. In the

beginning, I was up and at it every hour of the day.”

It felt like forever since the last time I had talked with my brother like this. We had been separated for two years, but even before that, he’d spent all his time with his nose up the second prince’s butt, so we’d hardly said two words to each other.

“I see...” Berne muttered.

“May I ask you something now?” I said.

“What?”

“Why did you support the second prince on that day?”

“Why?” Berne frowned. “Because of what you did to Yuri.”

“Because I criticized her and spread rumors, then. So, you knew the effect your actions would have, but you went through with it anyway?”

“...”

“If you want to be prime minister in Father’s stead one day, you need to think more about cause and effect—not just the major consequences, either, but all the rippling side effects of your actions. I don’t know much about what you get up to in the royal capital. I don’t want to, either. However, I know people don’t like it. Presently, no one wants to hand you the governorship, and don’t even dream about being prime minister.”

Grandfather had said as much once, when he let a small thing slip: “Louis is doing fine work. Berne, on the other hand...”

“It’s a vassal’s duty to execute the wishes of the royal family,” Berne said stiffly.

“The prime minister’s role is to move the country in accordance with the king’s will,” I allowed. “However, it is also their job to risk their own neck to warn the king when he might be making a mistake. You speak of executing the royal family’s will. Have you no other emotions?”

Berne said nothing. I could have left it at that. But I couldn’t stop thinking of House Armelia and our long line of proud prime ministers. I valued our role in the kingdom—the power, and the responsibility. If I wanted to preserve those, I needed to correct my brother’s course.

“Having emotions and being moved by them are two different

things,” I said. “I was driven by terrible jealousy to trouble Yuri the way I did, and I reaped the consequences. I lost all my allies, and I was expelled from the academy. Back then, you stood with the crowd who condemned me. Yet I have to wonder if you aren’t on track to end up just as I did.” I looked back down at my papers. “That’s all from me. Do you have any other questions?”

“No...”

“I see. Then you’re dismissed. I still have work, so I can’t chat.”

Berne left, and I heaved a deep sigh. I was so tired. When Berne was around, I kept seeing the shadow of Prince Edward and his hangers-on.

There was another knock at the door. *Who could it be this time?*

“Pardon me,” my next guest said as he entered.

“Oh, Sebastian. What is it?”

“I noticed the light was still on in this room. My lady, you need to sleep.”

I waved him off. “I just need a little longer. I want to go through this report from the academy of higher education. It’s about the agricultural research you spoke of today. These people are amazing. Their methodology is so thorough, and they always get results. It’s a joy to watch.”

“You did quite a bit of good, bringing all those lone minds together to discuss and experiment alongside each other. I, too, am excited to see what they come up with.”

“Indeed. All these things I never knew, could never imagine... When I see it written down, I’m continually surprised.”

“So there *are* things you don’t know, then?” Sebastian mused.

“Oh, Sebastian. Of course there are. Financial topics aside, I’m absolutely useless when it comes to agriculture and medicine. That’s why I created an institute for higher education and research—to leave these things to the experts.”

On my own, I had plenty of limits. It was best to leave certain paths to the pros.

“And over here is—”

“The report from Borsa,” I said. “I’ve already read it. We need to

investigate more.”

Considering its nature, we had to think about the effects over the long-term. Just looking at the report jumbled my brain. Right now, what I really needed was someone to discuss and argue about these things with, so I could get my own thoughts in order.

“Of course.”

“By the way, Sebastian. How was Berne today?”

“He accomplished every task given to him with aplomb.”

“I see...”

“Just between you and me, while we were at Borsa, he asked about you. ‘Does my sister always work this much? Why is she working so hard?’”

“A bit rude...”

“I suspect he was simply shocked. At the academy, Lord Berne basked under the title of ‘prodigy.’ Yet it was all he could do to keep up with the conversations held in your study. It must have made an impact to see you at work, surrounded by your papers.”

“You understand him well.”

“I’ve watched over him since he was a young boy. His expressions are simply read.”

True enough. Sebastian had served our family since before my brother and I were born, and he had watched over us as we grew. In some sense, he was like another parent.

“And I’m sure you noticed him staring at you.”

“I did.” Thanks to that staring, I was more exhausted than usual.

“That was because he was observing you as keenly as he could. When he left the room, he was so shocked that he could hardly stand.”

“Well, hopefully he learned something.” If *my* mornings knocked him for a loop, then I truly would have loved for him to spend a day learning from Father.

“I believe he did.”

Was that what Mother was after? Berne was prideful and couldn’t hide his thoughts. I worried that when he returned to the capital and rejoined the second prince, his brain would once more turn to mush.

But as long as he attended the academy, he would have to return to the capital.

“Thank you for this chat, Sebastian. It was enjoyable, and I’m feeling a little hopeful now.” I yawned. “But you’re right, I should get some sleep.”

A few days later, Berne and I went to visit the higher-level academy. I was there because of the report the other day; I wanted to see what it was like for myself. I wasn’t sure why I’d brought Berne along. I supposed you could say I had some small hope that he would learn something new.

Also with us were my grandfather, Tanya, and Lyle. The academy was in a corner of the city. It was about as large as the duke’s mansion. The building was of simple construction, made from sturdy stone. Class was not yet in session, because it was quite noisy inside.

“Why am I here...?” Berne, however, was being annoying.

Was Sebastian being too optimistic? I wondered as I resolved to ignore him.

“Why is there even an academy for commoners?” he went on.

Now *that* infuriated me. “If you’re feeling so condescending, Berne, I encourage you to attend a class,” I said lightly. “I’ll square it with the headmaster. But you’re forbidden to mention our family name. Grandfather, I’m sorry, but could you mind him?”

Here, no one would recognize him or Berne. Grandfather nodded, and he dragged Berne into a random classroom. Ah, peace and quiet.

“Lady Iris, why did you bother bringing him?” Tanya also seemed to be a bit irritated, her tone thorny.

“I’m starting to wonder why as well.”

But it was no use dwelling on the past. Moving forward, I proceeded into the headmaster’s office.

“It’s good to see you again. Is this the first time we’ve met on campus?” I asked.

Sitting across from me was the academy's highest administrator, Headmaster Luka Samosa. He came off as an easygoing, good-natured old man. The second son of a noble, he loved academics and research to the detriment of all his noble responsibilities and had eventually been disowned by his family. Thus, Samosa was a surname he'd come up with on his own. I didn't think I could have found a more suitable headmaster.

"It is good to see you too, my lady," he said. "I believe the last time we met was when you appointed me headmaster."

"Oh...was it? So, how are you finding your work?"

"It's wonderful. Quite a blessing to be able to meet the young people taking paths I've previously tread—and pushing beyond the point I made it to. It is a gathering place for those who aspire to great heights, after all."

"I'm glad you seem so satisfied, Headmaster Luka. Have you had any difficulty running the academy?"

"The word *headmaster* is just a title. It is the people you employed who truly run this academy, which allows me to focus on teaching. I am tremendously satisfied."

"I see... Then please, tell me about the lives your students live."

"Pardon, ma'am?"

"Please. Strip away all formality and give me your honest thoughts."

"My, my... What purpose might that serve, I wonder."

"Ah, well... It's just the sad wish of a foolish woman forced to give up her schooling, one who hopes to revisit those days she lost."

"In that case, my lady, allow me to talk your ear off."

And talk my ear off he did. He told me about the experiments, the debates. This academy placed a high value on practical skills, so theory-driven courses were balanced out with rigorous practicums. I also learned the many forms of debate they taught. Luka really seemed to be enjoying himself. If this was an indication of how much he saw in our academy's future, then I could be happy.

"But most of all, our success is driven by the passion of our students. They attend out of a thirst for knowledge, rather than because

anyone forced them. This has led to an overall increase in devotion to their subject matter. At first, there were tensions between the rich and poor, but the demands of our institution are far too grueling to allow anyone to fuss over such things for too long. Now, rather than an academy, it's like we've become a research machine. Lately, even priests of the Darryl Church have attended."

His last words surprised me. Priests, here? Those of the Darryl Church usually cut themselves off from the material world, and they were practically never seen outside Church activities. Then again, that had changed quite a bit since the pope joined the noble sphere. For the normal priests, however, things were the same... Or so I'd believed.

"Why, that's odd to hear," I said.

"Indeed. They come for the medical classes. They claim to seek the knowledge to save forsaken children, and they study quite hard."

"Goodness..."

I chatted with Headmaster Luca for a while longer before excusing myself just as first period ended. As I walked down the hall, I spotted one of the aforementioned priests. He was wearing his vestments, so there was no mistaking him.

"Father, are you a student here as well?" I called out to him, and he turned to me with a blank look. "Pardon me," I said, "but I'm still debating whether to attend this academy. Thus, I've come for a tour."

"Oh, I see. This place is wonderful, you know. It's full of opportunities and teachers to help you learn as much as your heart desires," he replied.

"Really... If you don't mind me asking, why is it you come to this academy?"

"I've always freely offered my services as a doctor to the people of the city. Unfortunately, there were just so many cases where I lacked the knowledge to be of meaningful help. I was feeling powerless and then I heard about this place."

"You have a good heart, Father."

"No, this is only the natural obligation of one who serves God."

He had a nice smile. I'd meant what I said about his heart, too. The Church was a shield for the people. A hand of salvation for the poor. They offered meals to those in need and cared for the sick.

However, at present, only a small arm of the Church still devoted themselves to these services. It was especially bad in the royal capital, in my opinion. Once we'd started treating the pope's family like nobility, this change had been inevitable.

I continued walking until I spotted my grandfather and Berne. Grandfather seemed to be as fine as when I'd left him, but Berne appeared a bit tired.

"Looks like they chewed you up and spat you out," I said.

"What in the world are these classes?" he muttered.

"Oh? Were they that surprising?"

He fell amazingly quiet at this.

"The subjects here are all directly tied to daily life, like medicine and agriculture," I said. "It's for that reason that everyone studies so intently. They want to make their own lives better and enrich the lives of those they care for. You asked why this place exists, and now you've experienced it for yourself. Having a clear goal gives the students great motivation to achieve."

"Iris, why did you build this place?"

I frowned at him. "All you ever ask is why. But fine. The more people who study here and gain knowledge, the more that knowledge will spread among our people. It might take some time, but in ten or twenty years, the Armelian standard of living will surely rise. As governor, I believe it's necessary to look toward that future."

Berne fell silent again, considering this. He stayed quiet even on the way home. I just hoped he had learned something.

And with that, it was time for me to get back to my normal life as well.

After staying with us for a few more days, my brother gave up on changing our mother's mind and left. The royal engagement party would be held as planned without issue, even if Mother and the queen dowager didn't attend. However, without them, it would be difficult to call the party a success.

In the following weeks, the baron's daughter became Prince Edward's fiancée in truth. As usual, the first prince refused to step into the public eye, even at this development. Furthermore, this year, the second prince would graduate. I heard a lot more about him and his exploits than of the first prince, who remained hidden.

The second prince's allies were all the most "noble" of nobles. In other words, they came from long bloodlines and attended numerous tea parties and balls. Perhaps that was why I heard about them more. Incidentally, most of their families were in desperate financial straits. They spent profusely and had no real income to speak of. I came by this information via the Azuta Corporation. Basically, the unflattering truth was that the second prince's allies were a bunch of penniless mendicants coasting on their vaunted past.

In contrast, the first prince's allies were mostly made up of new houses that had risen in the ranks thanks to their noteworthy contributions to the kingdom, or nobles who focused on local enterprises. It was for this reason that even in the palace, the attention-seeking second prince's allies were doing their best to make their presence felt. I could only hope it wasn't causing Father too much stress. Speaking of which, Mother said she would be returning to the capital soon, now that the engagement party was over and done with.

As for me, I was still as heinously busy as ever. It would be lonely without Mother around. I found myself wishing we could relax together a little longer.

"Huh? This document..."

"What is it, my lady?"

"Oh, I was just surprised. It's so well structured. The writing is clear and forward, and the inclusion of comparative data makes for easy reference. Who put this together?"

The document in question was a report on equipment to be purchased for the academy. It calculated the total cost of each individual piece combined, which was a fairly simple task. Yet the report before me went above and beyond. First of all, not only did it

record the items I had specifically requested, it compared prices set by different companies based on buying routes and shipping cost. Everything I would have asked for after the fact had already been delivered to me.

“A temporary hire at the merchant guild, my lady. His performance has been highly rated.”

“Hm... Is this person also capable of accounting?”

“I couldn’t say if they’re practiced, but they *are* from the merchant guild. I suspect they would pick it up quickly enough.”

“Then have them handle this.”

I passed him a record of the duchy’s tax revenue. I was currently trying to unify all records going back ten years into one document, but it was slow going. What was really sucking up my time was determining our future policy. However, collecting past records and preserving them would help in estimating future tax revenue for the whole duchy, so I wanted to get the job done as soon as possible. My goal was to compile reports from the villages and towns, consolidate them to calculate the duchy’s revenue, then deduct from that total the expenses of running the government as well as the money my household spent.

Previously, reports had been accepted and, if there were no issues, filed away. However, while these records were periodically confirmed and recorded, they were not organized; hence my current workload.

“I shall deliver this, then.”

“Find out his name for me, too. If you find yourself with some time, that is.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Sebastian took the documents and exited the room.

There are some interesting people out there, I thought idly to myself as I stared at the pile of papers on my desk.

Three weeks passed, and I still couldn’t forget that temporary hire at the merchant guild. They displayed such skill that I got excited just thinking about the next time they’d submit a report. However, it was

now slightly late, and I couldn't help feeling disappointed. I felt two weeks should have been more than enough for the amount of work I put before them.

"Pardon me." As I was doing battle with my own pile of papers in the study, Sebastian entered. "The tax revenue record is finished, so I've brought it to you."

"I see. I'll look at it later."

"No, I believe you should look at it immediately." He sounded so serious, and a bit shocked.

Apprehensive, I took the documents. The stack was thick and heavy. The moment I saw the words on the first page, I couldn't look away.

"What...is this?" I was so surprised I could hardly speak. My fingers itched to flip to the next page, and I devoured the contents. "And the initial record I handed you?"

"It's over here."

I quickly compared the two. "Good heavens... Sebastian, you verified this before coming to me?"

"Yes. That's the reason I insisted you read it."

"What's the name of the person who wrote this?"

"He calls himself Dean."

"I see. Could you summon him? Right away, if you please."

"Of course. I'll be right back. Just a few minutes, my lady."

Sebastian exited the room. After he left, I heaved a deep sigh. Then, I looked at the front page of the document again.

Fraudulent Budget Applications. The subject line bowled me over. The text went on to list subsidiary aid given to each village and town that submitted a shortfall in their budget estimate. From those, it highlighted an application from one specific town. There was nothing especially suspicious about this single request. It had been approved, as had past applications from the same town. However, when one gathered every application this town had ever submitted, they were requesting financial aid far more frequently than any other town in the duchy.

For example, the first highlighted application requested aid with produce. In their application, they claimed nothing had grown that

season and thus they required financial assistance to survive. It wasn't rare for the ducal house to provide such funds at times like these. Historically, feudal lords had been generous with their citizens, within a certain price range.

The thing was, the nearest town to the one submitting the request, which shared an agricultural region, didn't make any similar claims. Furthermore, the author had investigated the town's agricultural exports, specifically as they were used to pay taxes, and had found the suspicious town grew nothing its neighbors didn't also grow. Not only that, the author had found multiple expense claims in the town's budget that seemed shady at best.

It had been many years—perhaps generations—since any central Armelian official visited the outlying towns to inspect their goings-on. So long as an application was bureaucratically sound and the estimated budget fell within reasonable bounds, it was approved. For myself, I had allowed my government to focus exclusively on new developments, and we had failed to see the fault at our feet. The report went on to include past cases of this town's fraudulent claims that were now too old to truly confirm one way or another.

While I looked over the report again, I heard a knock. Sebastian entered with a man about my age, or perhaps a little older, in tow. His blond hair and emerald-green eyes were stunning. His physique complemented his good looks, and I imagined a girl with more time could have stared at him for hours.

"Nice to meet you," I said. "My name is Iris. Iris Lana Armelia. I've been appointed acting governor of these lands."

"It is an honor. My name is Dean. I've been working for you on the recommendation of the merchant guild." He gave me a friendly smile, but I sensed something off about it. It was as if he wished to mask his true personality.



“What company were you previously employed by?”

“Oh, I’m still studying, so I only work part-time. Before that, I learned reading, writing, and arithmetic from a family friend.”

“I see. Let’s get straight to the point, then. How did you come to spot these incongruencies?”

“At first, I was simply following instructions and reading through old reports, comparing data, and recording incomes and expenditures into one document. However, as I was compiling the numbers, the reports from one town stuck out to me. I began to wonder if a town of that scale required the sort of budget they requested.”

“Were you familiar with the town before you began working here?”

“I’ve never visited. I can identify it on a map, though.”

“I see. Now, what do you recommend I do about this?”

“Ideally, implement a system that employs a third party to oversee the use of financial aid. That said, I realize the difficulty in devising such an organization from scratch. Perhaps the duties could be appended to a minister’s responsibilities.”

I got chills. His interest wasn’t punishment for the specific crime but in addressing the system such that the crime could not be replicated. That was exactly what I wanted to hear.

Inspired, I muttered to myself as I once more looked down at the documents. “Perhaps we should make it mandatory for town and village mayors to attend the higher education courses on finance. Abitante is currently assessing land ownership and clarifying property rights, so... Yes, let’s do that immediately. The rural areas can then calculate expected revenue, and we can incorporate that into future reports in order to better assess—”

“I don’t know much about these finance classes, but will these mayors be able to take on the responsibility of the curriculum in addition to their present duties?” Dean interrupted.

“You have a point. We’ll have to consider their schedules. Perhaps we can begin by stipulating that detailed lists of expenditures be included with applications. In that case, we should ensure that shops keep ledgers to certify proof of purchase.”

“That would be difficult to implement. Larger companies are one thing, but small businesses...”

“Indeed. For now, the detailed expenditures will have to do. We can see how things go from there.”

Additional budget applications aside, in the past, yearly budgets had been approved with an “Okay, use it on whatever” attitude. The funds we dispensed came from taxes taken from the citizenry. We needed a new management system—one that would prevent future scandals.

But what to do about this particular incident? Who had embezzled, and how far did the rot extend? It seemed to have been going on until just before I came into power, so I had to punish these criminals to make an example of them.

Perhaps I'll just leave it to Dean, I thought. But he wasn't a government official, and I knew next to nothing about him. Despite that, I still considered giving him the authority to carry out this massive undertaking. As I hemmed and hawed, I heard a knock at the door.

“Pardon me. Iris, dear, I wanted to speak to you about that beauty lotion you gave me...” In came my mother. “Oh?”

The moment she entered, the sight of Dean made her pause.

“It's a pleasure to see you again, ma'am,” he said. “The last time we met was at Marquis Anderson's, wasn't it?”

“Y-yes... I believe so. It's been so long that I was taken aback.”

Her words surprised me. “Mother, have you met Dean before?”

“Yes, through your grandfather.”

He knew...Grandfather? I looked at Dean curiously, and he smiled awkwardly.

“I often went to train in martial arts at Marquis Anderson's thanks to a family connection. That's when I met your mother.”

“Oh, I see...” Did that mean he was someone of lineage?

“What are you doing here, then, if I may ask?” Mother asked.

“I'm a temporary hire via the merchant guild, ma'am. Lady Iris had some questions about the report I submitted.”

“Oh, really?” Mother eyed me.

“Dean, could you leave us for a bit?” I asked. “I must address my mother’s questions. During that time, can you double-check these documents?”

“Of course.”

When Dean was gone, I rounded on my mother. “Mother, what do you think of Dean?”

“What do I think? He’s a wonderful man.”

True, I found myself instinctively agreeing—but only for a moment. “That’s not what I mean. What I’m asking is...”

“I’m joking.” She smiled. “I think he’s trustworthy. If you want, ask your grandfather about him.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary. I’ll trust your word. Thank you.”

Mother had an eye for people, unlike me. But most importantly, she and Grandfather already knew Dean. In that case, I didn’t need to worry about his character.

I answered her questions about the lotion, and she suggested a few ideas for new products. Before she left, she told me not to push myself. Once she was gone, I jotted down the ideas I’d voiced out loud earlier. The scratching of pen on paper filled the room.

“Pardon me. I finished my checks, so I came back,” said Dean at the door.

“Oh, good timing. Dean, would you mind if I appointed you the official in charge of this matter?”

His eyes widened with surprise for a second, then he grinned wryly again. “I would like nothing more than to assist, but unfortunately, I cannot stay here for long.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“My family requires my help. Every now and again, I have to go home and attend to them.”

“I see... What sort of duties does that entail?”

I didn’t want to give up, so I dug deeper. I had *just* been thinking of hiring more people. And who should appear before me but a man I could entrust with a large amount of work without training? He also came with my family’s seal of approval, to boot. I couldn’t let him slip away.

“The family business. That’s the reason I joined the merchant guild to study.”

“Yes. Before, you said ‘every now and again,’ didn’t you?”

“I... Yes, I did.”

“Then, Dean, I don’t mind if you return to your family whenever you need. But once your work for them is done, could you please come back here and resume your position in Armelia?”

His eyes went even wider at my proposal—and, more likely, at my refusal to back down. I realized I was getting ahead of myself a little. Still, I really didn’t want to give up on him. Plus, my government hadn’t thus far placed especially tight restrictions on its officials.

“When you return, we can write you up a short-term employment contract,” I said as a compromise. “If you can inform me prior to your arrival, I can make the necessary arrangements. As for pay, we can calculate it based on the number of days you work in an official capacity.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“That’s what I want to ask you,” I said. “Is that good enough? If you have any other conditions, please tell me. So, will you accept?”

“Very well. It’s a pleasure to be in your employ.”

And with that, I’d scouted my first talent, albeit on an irregular schedule.

The next day, I visited the city again. It had been too long since my last trip. But for once my schedule was surprisingly empty, and Lyle and Dida happened to be home. All together, my group consisted of me, Lyle, Dida, Tanya, and Dean. A bit of a crowd, I realize, but Grandfather had been forced to return to his estate, so I had to make do.

Lyle and Dida had been away on patrols, so they hadn’t met Dean...or so I thought.

“Hey, if it isn’t Dean.”

The two of them reacted quite differently than I’d imagined.

“It’s good to see you two again, Sir Lyle and Sir Dida.”

“You’re so stiff! I told you to just call me Dida.”

“Lyle, Dida, you know Dean?” I asked.

“Yup. We trained together a bunch of times under the master. We didn’t talk much, but I definitely remember his skills.”

Their master was, of course, my grandfather. In retrospect, I should have realized that. It oddly made sense. Lyle and Dida had lived on my grandfather’s estate while they trained, after all.

“Then I’m guessing you’ve met him too, Tanya?”

Tanya shook her head. “No. I had my handmaid’s training to attend, so I couldn’t stay long with the master like Lyle and Dida. I did hear you attended on an irregular schedule, Mr. Dean.”

“Ah... I see. Anyway, you’re my entourage for this trip into the city. Dean, Lyle, Dida, no calling me Iris while we’re outside. Call me Alice.”

And so, the five of us left the mansion. We walked down the main street, heading south. As usual, it was overflowing with activity and people were rushing this way and that. As a consequence of the creation of Azuta’s shipping department—and, likely, the improved roads—I got to see seafood from southern towns in various shops.

“Alice! Quite the gang of handsome men with you, I see.” An older woman presiding over her open-air stall called out to me.

“Huh? You think so? Well, perhaps you’re right.”

I turned around, and...yeah, I could see it. I seemed to have grown numb to beauty, being surrounded by it every day.

“I’ve got some anuta today! Wanna buy some?”

Anuta was a type of fish. Its flesh was red, and it was delicious stewed, grilled, or raw.

“Oh!” I gasped. “Fresh-frozen and transported with ice? And for so cheap? That’s a surprise.”

“Thanks. You always understand my troubles, Alice. That makes me happy.”

“But, hmm... I feel like eating at a restaurant today. I’ll be back another time to make a purchase.”

“Yeah? I’ll be awaiting your return, then.”

“Be sure to catch me up on your son next time,” I called.

“You got it!” She waved.

Our pleasant chat over, I turned around. Tanya and Lyle were stone-faced as always, Dida was laughing his head off, and Dean’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates. Talk about variety.

“You two were pretty friendly,” Dean said, unable to hide his surprise.

“Yes, people are quite generous when you speak with them frankly, I find.”

As we talked, we returned to the main street. Every now and again, I stopped to talk to the friends I’d made on my various trips. Every time, Dean was taken aback.

“Why, if it isn’t Father Rafiel.”

“Oh, Ms. Alice. It’s good to see you again.”

Rafiel was a priest and student of my academy—the one I had met when I first visited the academy for higher education. His new mission was to employ the techniques he learned for the sake of the sick. He didn’t charge the people who were too poor to see other doctors, which had made him very popular. I also donated to his church under the name “Alice.” Currently, I only had access to my “allowance,” the personal remuneration I received from my business, but one day I hoped to support him in my official capacity.

That said, there were several complications in the way of that. For example, supporting only one church would make it seem like I favored it over others. But if I donated to other churches, or even the Darryl Church main branch, I doubted that money would ever reach the people who did good work like Rafiel.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“To the slums. I have a number of patients there.”

“I see. You’re so dedicated. May God bless your actions.”

“Thank you very much.”

As it happened, I was also headed for the slums. Compared to the last time I came, there seemed to be fewer people sitting on the sides of the street. Business had been booming, and the increase in jobs had

contributed to the decline in the number of destitute citizens.

“Does that priest operate as a doctor here?” Dean asked.

I nodded. “Yes, he does.”

“In other words, for free?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“No, I’ve just never seen that... For a priest of the Darryl Church to serve the people.”

It seemed Dean shared my sentiments. Where exactly had that “final bastion of the people” the Church was once known as gone?

“I used to think the same,” I said. “But it turns out not all priests curry favor with the nobility and lounge about in luxury.”

“The slums here are astounding,” Dean murmured.

“Astounding?” I frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“I was taught that if you want to see a community’s true face, you look to their poorest members. So when I arrived in this city, I visited the slums right away. The conditions here are so much better than anywhere else I’ve been.”

“Only better, huh?” I grinned bitterly at this. It was an accurate assessment. Coming here always made me realize how far my reforms had to go before they reached all my people. “I still have to find a way to officially support the work of people like Father Rafiel.”

“What sort of work do you mean?”

“My plan is to create a system of insurance. I’ll collect money from the people in the form of taxes, then use it to pay their bills when they have to visit a doctor. Individuals will be responsible for some of the payment, but the government will take care of the rest.”

“I see... And this is the reason for your census and tax reforms?”

Dean’s question made me grin. He obviously knew my current projects, but I hadn’t expected him to extrapolate so far based only on this short conversation.

“If you ever manage that, doctors will have a lot of new paperwork to do, submitting certificates of treatment and such,” Dean said thoughtfully. “Hopefully you’ll mostly have good actors within this system, but it’s possible some people will try to overcharge their

clients.”

“Yes, that will be a problem,” I agreed.

“I can see that increasing work for your officials, so perhaps it would be smart to increase the number of people with authority to supervise. For example, what about creating a guild?”

I gasped with the delight of insight. “I see... A doctor’s guild, similar to the merchant guild. And if you’re a member of this guild, you can receive assistance from the government on your bills. They can leave the number-crunching to the guild headquarters, and if there are any scandals, the guild will mete out punishment.”

“It would be wise to send a few government officials to inspect the guild every so often as well. If supervision required government officials, you’d need dozens more people. But if you got the guild to handle most of the work, then you would only need to dispense a few officials to oversee the proceedings.”

“That’s a great idea. Let’s discuss it further later and devise some treatment certification forms to go with it. We’ll need to talk to other officials, as well.”

“As you wish.”

Lyle and Dida listened with varying degrees of surprise on their faces.

“Dean, you can keep up with her ramblings?” Lyle asked.

“Ramblings?” Dean grinned wryly.

“Anyway, the princess has been really busy lately. Poor Tanya’s tearing her hair out over her health. Unfortunately, we couldn’t help on that front, even if we wanted to. So I think it’s great a guy like you could come by and really support her. And you ain’t even some stranger! Small world, huh?” Dida smiled widely.

It made me happy to know he was concerned for me, but at the same time, if even *he* was hearing about me overworking... He was hardly around! Ugh, I really needed to change things, huh? However, before I could start feeling grateful, I scolded him. “Dida, don’t call me ‘Princess.’ I told you to use ‘Alice.’”

I could only be grateful that no one else was around to hear him!

Chapter 5: The Duke's Daughter's Heart Quivers

“**D**EAN, WON'T YOU consider a life with me?”

I begged for what seemed like the thousandth time, but Dean simply smiled with nary an eyebrow raised.

“I appreciate the offer, but...”

And for the thousandth time, he shot me down. Ugh, this was so frustrating. Now, if you had just tuned in to this conversation, you might think I was confessing my love. Or I might even sound like something slightly more dangerous: a woman trying to seduce her young servant boy in desperate pursuit of a beautiful companion...

Well, in some sense I was indeed trying to seduce him.

I sighed. “Fine. Don’t think this means I’m giving up, though. But for this week at least, I’m glad to have you.”

“Glad to be of service.”

What was he doing this week, you might ask? Why, participating in the government as my aide. It had been four months since I first scouted Dean. He was handling his job wonderfully, and we were closing in on a resolution to the embezzlement case.

As it turned out, it wasn’t the town mayor but the town’s accountant and his family who were the masterminds. I say accountant, but all they really did was deal with government officials. He was also the mayor’s younger brother. Our investigation revealed that he had played around and fallen into debt. Basically, it was the tale of an irresponsible younger brother and an inattentive older brother. As such, the younger brother had been fired and the older brother dismissed due to joint liability. Both had also been fined. I made sure to impress on them that they were lucky to not be rotting in cells.

It wasn’t a perfect ending, but Dean performed admirably. Simultaneously, he managed to finish the record of past taxes. I really was glad to have found him.

“Here are reports from the academy’s departments on their

income and expenses, as well as applications for next year's budget," he said.

"Oh, the forms are finished?" I asked.

"I took the liberty of adjusting them a bit."

"Thanks. Elementary-level classes are now open all across the duchy. Next, I'm thinking of establishing a middle level that focuses on occupational training."

"With our present budget, that will be difficult," Dean cautioned.

"True enough. We really need to switch to a stable tax revenue system."

"That said, it's also too early for a consumption tax. The fundamental principles of any tax are objectivity, simplicity, and fairness. At present, with elementary schools open, the literacy level of the people will slowly rise. Ensuring their understanding—and support—at this point will be difficult. And while big companies would be one thing, the strain on smaller businesses would be too much."

"I know..." I groaned.

"However, I believe it's an innovative idea," Dean said. "When the regional literacy level has risen a bit higher and arithmetic has had time to spread, you should go ahead and introduce it."

"Hmm... Should I start here, after all?" I flipped through the income proposal.

"You mean abolishing the poll tax and switching to an income tax? Personally, I have my doubts. As I said earlier, the fundamental principles of taxation are objectivity, simplicity, and fairness. The other advantage of a poll tax is that it reminds everyone they're part of the duchy."

"The problem is that it's *too* impartial. We're even taxing children with no ability to pay. The poll tax is nothing more than a shackle for people looking for work."

In terms of pure theory, I did think a poll tax was ideal. It was simple and impartial. But in reality, it was too impartial, which actually led it to be unfair. Furthermore, taxing those who could not pay not only deprived the government of money, it became an incredible psychological burden for the taxed.

“That is a valid point of view,” Dean conceded.

“This draft proposes taxing based on personal income,” I explained. “But it might be too difficult for those in some professions, like farmers, to accurately calculate their annual income. Perhaps the town halls should calculate an ‘estimated income’ and collect based on that?”

“Is that why you’ve been pushing to have Abitante clarify property law?”

“It is. Of course, that’s not the only reason.”

“I see. This system would also let you take the year’s climate into consideration when it comes time to collect.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Dean frowned. “Is it possible to get the manpower needed to perform those calculations for each town hall, though?”

I paged through some documents and produced the relevant folder. “I have Borsa employees taking turns attending higher-level finance classes. So there’s them, plus the upcoming academy graduates. Ideally, the populace will eventually be educated enough to file their own taxes.”

“That sounds like it’ll take quite a long time.”

“Well, I never expected anything overnight. The key word is ‘eventually.’ Furthermore, we have to establish taxes on businesses, not just individuals. At present, a company and its president are jumbled together when calculating income tax. We have to separate cases where the president receives a salary from the company from cases where company and personal income are treated the same. Then we can apply a tax rate focused on businesses.”

“Don’t you think that would incite backlash from the merchants?”

“We could ease off on tariffs at the same time. Currently, even within the duchy, whenever goods enter or leave a town, a fee has to be paid. We can change that to apply only to goods leaving or entering the duchy while also lowering the tax rate. If we do, it should also increase the flow of goods.”

“The two combined would temper any outrage. Also, most companies have employees studying double-entry bookkeeping at the academy, so they should be able to calculate and file the new taxes

themselves. Which means the burden on our end won't increase too much."

"Yes!" I grinned and began noting down our most important thoughts. "Let's collect the main points we just discussed and present the timeline to Borsa again."

Thanks to Dean's help, I spent far less time on governmental duties and was able to visit the city more often. These trips were profoundly refreshing. Strolling down the main street, I window-shopped at various stores.

Suddenly, I spotted a couple entering a sizable store, arms linked intimately. If I recalled correctly, that was a famous jewelry store that had invested in the academy.

"My lady, is something the matter?" Tanya noticed me gazing off into the distance and looked at me worriedly.

"I'm fine. Do you two mind if we make one last stop at the orphanage?"

"As you wish, Lady Alice." Dean smiled.

Lately, whenever I went into the city, I invited Dean as well. It gave me an opportunity to bounce ideas off him as they came to me. It was nice that he was so quick on the uptake. Plus, Lyle and Dida guaranteed he could protect me if it came to it. However, Tanya had been rather vehemently against my excursions with Dean, which was why she still insisted on tagging along.

Funnily enough, though I had never imagined Dean interacting with children, he turned out to be pretty good with them. Now they loved him more than me. A small part of me was jealous, but it was lovely to see him playing together with the orphans, so I put up with it.

"Big brother! Big sister! Will you come visit again?"

Those doe eyes made my head spin. Ah, so cute!

"Of course," I promised. "Right, Dean?"

"Yes. So be good and wait for us, okay?"

As the sun began to set, I headed home feeling entirely fulfilled. Today had been so fun. I was all energized for tomorrow. I had started taking breaks after Mother stayed with us but never any real holidays. Lately, however, I'd been able to go into the city all day as a "day off" whenever Dean was in town. It was thanks to him that my workload now tended to be taken care of early enough for me to do so, even leaving me with enough time to take off for a whole day. I supposed this, too, was important.

"Lady Iris, do you have a moment?" Dean entered the study and, upon spotting me doing battle with a pile of documents, frowned deeply. "I don't believe you have any pressing work... Is something bothering you?"

"No. I'm just noting down the ideas that came to mind during today's trip outside."

"Then why did I see you writing about the budget composition?"

I smiled sheepishly at his sharp question. I couldn't hide anything from him. "It really started out as just note-taking, but then I spotted some unresolved issues," I confessed. "So I figured I'd fit in what I could."

"Rest is important—and necessary. Remember what Dida said? You worry everyone in this mansion when you get too focused on your job." Dean frowned. "Why *do* you work so hard?"

The cogs in my brain stopped turning for a moment. I hadn't expected the question. "You're working hard too, Dean."

"It's not the same. I work to provide for myself. But you're different. As the duke's daughter—the prime minister's daughter, no less—you don't have to work to survive."

He had a point. It was exceedingly rare for nobles to work, especially noblewomen. It was believed that a wife's role was to protect the family and throw parties, leaving the care of the house and territory to servants. Things had been similar in Armelia until that fateful day two years ago.

"But I've been appointed acting governor. Isn't it a noble's duty to

perform as needed such that no dishonor befalls their position?"

Dean smiled tightly. "Don't take this the wrong way, but my sense of the nobility has always been of people who get fat off the taxes they milk from their citizens. Besides, couldn't you pawn off the responsibility to Sebastian, like your father did?"

"It isn't that I never thought of doing so... But in the end, this job was given to me specifically. So even if I'm inexperienced, I want to try my hardest. That's how I thought in the beginning, at least. Now, though..." My eyes fell to my hands. My small, small hands. It made me laugh to think how unsuited they were to grasping hold of a future for my people. What could I protect with these? "After meeting the children of that orphanage, I realized there was something I could do despite who I am—no, *because* of who I am. I learned to have faith in my actions. And if my efforts eke even one more smile from my people... If they're happy, then isn't that the most wonderful thing?"

"I see..." Dean's beautiful smile captured my whole attention for a moment.

Whoa, whoa! His smile was a dangerous weapon. I had to be more careful. Slightly ashamed, I looked down. Ugh, this wasn't like me.

"A-anyway, Dean, did you want to talk about something?"

"Oh," Dean muttered, as if he'd forgotten until just then. "It's nothing much, but do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

"During our trip today, you seemed lost in thought at one point."

It was my turn to mutter, "Oh."

"Something about you seemed a little different in that moment. Was anything bothering you?"

"No, not really. I was just impressed by how much one of the academy's investors had grown."

Dean gave me a troubled smile.

"Wh-what?"

"It's nothing," he said. "Only, you had that same numb expression just now."

"I did...?"

“Yes. Forgive my rudeness, but it wasn’t the store you were looking at, was it?”

Dean’s words pulled the pin holding in all my tension. He was so correct that, rather than exploding outward, the pressure that was built up so high within me slipped soundlessly from my body. I knew from Dean’s work that he was sharp and wise, but it would have been nice if he’d avoided pointing that acuity at me.

If he hadn’t dug so deep, though, I probably would have kept swallowing my feelings. And one day, all those bottled feelings would have consumed me, just like my resentment had when I lashed out at Yuri and Prince Edward those two long years ago.

“Could you humor me for a bit?” I asked.

“What do you want me to do?” he said.

“Open that cupboard.”

I pointed to the cabinet by the door. Dean did as I asked; inside was wine. It was made from grapes grown in the west. There were also wine glasses inside the cupboard so that the wine could be drunk at any time.

“Sometimes I get the urge, too,” I said. “Today’s my ‘day off,’ after all. Dean, do you partake?”

“If you want me to.”

I got up from the desk and sat on a low chair by a table. Dean pulled out the cork from the bottle and poured a glass.

“Dean, you sit, too.”

“By your leave.”

I picked up my glass; Dean did the same with his. We each took a sip. *Ah, that’s good.*

“Do men hate it when women ask them for objects?” I asked. “Or does it make them happy?”

Dean seems troubled by my non sequitur. “I couldn’t say. Perhaps it depends on the person.”

“Depends on the person... You’re right. I wonder which of those two suggested going to the jewelry store.” I took another sip. “They seemed so happy... Smiling, linking arms, and going places together. I was engaged once, but I never experienced any of that. Perhaps that’s

just my lot in life as a daughter of the nobility. Strategic, loveless marriages exist too, after all.”

But I had once loved the prince... The part of me that was a living person wistfully remembered that feeling, but the pain entwined with the memory stabbed at my heart.

“But even in strategic marriages... No, perhaps *especially* in strategic marriages, it’s common for presents to be given, right? I mean, even if it’s just for show.”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“Yet I never got a single one...”

Maybe I had meant nothing to Prince Edward even before I entered the academy. If that was the case, then how pathetic had I been, all excited about one day being queen? At the same time, I could sympathize with myself.

“Why do I work so hard?” I asked, echoing Dean’s question. “I told you it was because I want to use my power to bring even one more smile to my people’s faces... That’s not a lie. But perhaps, with equal ardor, I need to find meaning in my existence.”

My engagement had been broken off, bringing dishonor on my house. I had managed to avoid being disowned and exiled, but perhaps I’d thought myself on the edge of a cliff. Thus, work had become an obsession. Not only had I proved unable to arouse the least spark of interest from my ex-fiancé, I’d also failed to marry into the royal family. My reason for existing was...non-existent.

Amidst all that, the thing I discovered and clung to was work, and only work. Talk about selfish.

“Lady Iris, you mustn’t demean yourself.”

“Hm...?”

“You just told me your reason for governing as you do was your citizens, did you not?” Dean’s words were hesitant, but I waited patiently for him to continue. “No matter your motivation, no matter what else fuels you, you’ve seen what lies ahead, and you embrace your role. Thus, I believe you’ll never lose sight of what’s truly important.”

“You...do?”

“Yes. I have no advice to offer in matters of the heart, but this, at

least, I'm confident in stating."

"Ha...I see."

No more words were shared between us, but it wasn't a heavy silence in the least. In fact, it was the most comforting, relaxing span of simply *being* I'd experienced in a long while.

Two days later, on the final day of Dean's latest contract, I collapsed for the first time in a year. I had been so careful to prioritize my health... I didn't understand why this happened. But my fever left me no ability to ponder the question, and all I could do was sleep. The next time I opened my eyes, it was already dark in my room. Had I slept all day?

I sighed. Managing one's own health is one of the most basic aspects of any job. I couldn't believe I'd collapsed and slept the day away... What a failure of a governor I was.

"Tanya...?"

My voice was a bit dry, but nothing felt wrong with my throat. I was incredibly thirsty, though. My clothes stuck to me from the sweat, and it was, in a word, gross. Tanya, who had been waiting in my room, came to my pillow as soon as I called her. Her expression seemed slightly angry, yet also on the verge of tears.

"Some water, please," I murmured. "And a wet towel. I want to wipe myself down."

"Right away."

She must have prepared in advance, because she instantly handed me a glass of water. Ah, that did wonders for my parched throat. Then Tanya proceeded to briskly wipe me down with a wet towel. I wondered how much work had piled up by now... Even thinking about it sent a chill down my spine. Dean had already left for his family home that morning. Ugh, I shouldn't have taken that day off. Hindsight was twenty-twenty, of course. In any case, I closed my eyes to try to rest up for tomorrow.

The next morning, I dragged my heavy body out of bed and

headed for the study. *How tall will the pile of documents waiting for me be?* I wondered as I opened the door. On the desk was the same stack as ever—no, it was smaller than usual.

“What?”

At just that moment, I heard a knock, and Dean entered.

“Dean? But...why? Didn't you leave yesterday morning?”

“I should be the one asking questions here. Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, yes. I slept all day, after all. But that aside, this stack of papers...”

“I went through as many as my authority allowed. All that's left are reports that require your final check.”

“I see... Thank you. But, Dean, are you sure about this? You've gone over your contracted pay period.”

He frowned. “I couldn't just leave when you were sick. I was able to move some things in my schedule, so I'll be here for another two days.”

“I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble.”

“It's fine. It was my own decision. Now, please have a look at these.” Dean placed the reports down and left the room. Once he was gone, I scanned through them. No issues... Which was an issue in and of itself.

I couldn't help letting out a heavy sigh. This wasn't good. If something didn't change, I was going to end up dependent on Dean, and not only for work. Even now, I felt relieved to see him. I wanted to rely on him. I found myself wishing...he'd stay with me.

But I couldn't. I couldn't do that again. I had learned the truth with Prince Edward. One day, any day, even those you love most can betray you. That's why I had to be able to stand on my own two feet. So that was how I operated. I accepted help. I relied on people. I trusted others, if I thought they could handle it. But beneath the surface, I always thought, *They can handle this much, at least. I can trust that much, for now.* I was always drawing lines. That way, if they ever betrayed me, I would be okay. I'd survive.

Yet Dean threatened to destroy my equilibrium. He threatened to

step over the lines carefully drawn in my heart, tempting me to entrust him with anything—everything. And that...scared me. I shook my head vigorously, as if to deny my thoughts. I had to put them out of my mind.

Don't think. Put a lid on it. And one day...those feelings will disappear.

The man called Dean knocked on the door and entered. The room he stepped into was his mistress's study—temporarily, of course.

"Pardon me. I've brought your reports—"

He cut off midway through his sentence. Before him, Iris, his mistress, lay facedown, asleep on her desk. The sight brought a smile to his lips. She had collapsed two days ago, and yet today she returned to work. Without a doubt, she was pushing herself. Dean hadn't expected her to do so, and thus he'd extended his stay another two days. Looking at her now, it became clear that his decision had still been correct.

Iris worked far too much. The lives of her people and the Azuta Corporation's management rested on her narrow shoulders, so in some sense the workload was to be expected. However, how many other governors out there could say they dedicated so much of themselves?

"Goodness..."

If she kept this up, she would ruin her health again before she even properly recovered. But she slept so peacefully that he hesitated to wake her. Dean looked about for something to cover her but found nothing. Besides, it wasn't proper to get so close as to touch a lady while she slept. He would therefore look for her handmaid. The second the thought crossed his mind, he felt a presence behind him and turned to meet it.

"Good timing, Tanya," said Dean. "Lady Iris has fallen asleep. Can you get her a blanket?"

"Of course, although I'm surprised you noticed I was here."

His smile deepened. "What do you mean? I found Lady Iris asleep, so I turned and happened to see you."

Tanya raised an eyebrow. "Who in the world are you, really?"

This time, it was Dean's turn to look perplexed. "Well, that's an odd question. I'm just the son of a humble businessman from the capital. I may have trained under the general for a while, but I'm no one special."

"Are businessmen's sons normally so muscular?"

"I couldn't say. Others may be different, but my master was the general. His vocabulary doesn't include the word 'mercy.'"

"Indeed... You carry yourself as I do, and as Lyle and Dida do. I do believe that you trained under the marquis. But the way you sensed my presence... I did not learn the techniques my brethren did. If I truly wished to conceal myself, only the marquis himself could possibly detect me. So how did you?"

"I'm telling you, it was coincidence."

Tanya exhaled at this reply. She seemed to understand that she wasn't going to get anything further from him. However, that didn't change the fact that she had likely placed him on a mental list of all-too-troublesome individuals.

"Never mind," she said. "I'll take those documents off your hands."

"Thank you." Dean passed the papers to her and then exited the room as if nothing odd had happened.

"Goodness."

However, once he had some distance, Dean exhaled heavily and muttered to himself. He repeated the word he'd used earlier, but this time it carried an entirely different meaning: *I managed to extricate myself once, but I'll need to be more careful with her from now on.*

Funnily enough, his thoughts exactly mirrored Tanya's.

There was no need to arouse suspicions and cause a stir. The man known as Dean had taken a liking to his life in Armelia. Ideas he would never have imagined by himself seemed to pop out of Iris, one after another. Debating them with her was...fun. He'd never felt such joy.

When he saw her working herself to the bone, a desire rose in him to support her in any way he could. And whenever he extended a helping hand, she returned the favor by bringing more joy to his life. If anything about his existence could be called true, it was that he desired to stay by her side and enjoy himself, at least a little bit longer.

The kingdom of Tasmeria was a center of finance and culture. In a corner of its great capital, one could find the academy. Most people, upon first seeing the academy, thought it too grand for the word. That was because it functioned as a gathering place for noble sons and daughters from across the kingdom. Here, they devoted themselves to studying and forging connections day and night. On the large campus were the academy proper, the field, the training area, and the dormitories.

“Good morning, Prince Edward, Ms. Yuri.”

Iris’s younger brother, Berne, exited the dormitory and within moments ran into the second prince of the kingdom, Prince Edward, and his fiancée, Yuri. Male and female students occupied separate dorms, and the academy rules governing their interactions were strict, allowing no exceptions—not even for engaged couples. However, the prince and Yuri were nearly entwined as they walked from the dormitories to the instruction hall.

“Hey.”

“Good morning, Lord Berne.”

Prince Edward’s hair was a bright red, like his mother Ellia, the second queen, and his irises were jet-black. His sharp eyes gave him a hard air—save for when he was with Yuri, and the edges rounded off, leaving him looking quite kind.

I never saw him look like that with Iris, Berne thought. *He must really love Yuri.*

Beside him, Yuri’s fluffy, strawberry-colored hair was styled in braids. She hardly ever wore her hair like this, so it was even more striking. Her enormous green eyes were beautiful, and her expressive face as lovely as ever. The people around her frequently found

themselves likening her to a sunflower.

“Hey, Berne, were you up studying late again?” Edward suddenly asked.

“Yeah, kinda...” Berne replied evasively.

“Oh, no. Are you pushing yourself too hard again?” Yuri asked.

“I assure you, I’m not. I appreciate your concern, though.”

The look of worry on Yuri’s face filled Berne’s chest with warmth. For a moment, his expression went slack. She always found ways to remind him of why he’d fallen for her in the first place.

“That’s amazing, Lord Berne!”

Those were the first words she had ever said to him. At the time, he’d had absolutely no interest in her, so he had brushed her off. It had confounded him to think anyone would find him amazing in any respect. Coming first in academic rankings came simply to him, and his peers seemed to agree it was the natural order.

But to Yuri, Berne’s ability to remain at the top of the class was *amazing*. She had repeatedly begged him to help her study. It had felt kind of good, and before he realized it, he’d become her tutor. It still brought him joy to see her improving her grades with his help.

“Lord Berne, look! Thanks to you, my grades got so much better!”

Her grades, which had been the middle of the middle of the pack, had shot into the upper tiers. Berne was as happy for Yuri as if this were his own achievement. Somewhere along the way, her high-pitched voice took on a pleasant ring; being by her side brought him comfort. Many girls had approached him in the past, but none had made him feel like Yuri did.

In the end, he lost his chance to be with her forever when she and Edward became engaged. However, as long as Yuri was happy, it was fine. Berne would continue to watch over her from their side.

On the other hand, Berne had begun to cringe for letting himself become so convinced he was indeed *amazing*. He had even come to regret ever thinking so. He continued to reign at the top of his academic class, and his memory was as sharp as ever—but his confidence had been shattered by his reunion with Iris.

At the academy, his sister had never received impressive grades.

Yet on his trip home, Berne had discovered she was not only the president of a flourishing corporation, she was also the acting governor of Armelia. Iris did battle with mountains of documents, spoke in what seemed like a different language as she held meetings, then returned to hacking away at the papers. One minute she was lecturing him, the next minute back to work. She dove so deeply into her business that it made Berne's head spin.

Seeing her like that was at once surprising...and traumatizing. Berne had taken to proudly considering himself *amazing*, but on what basis? He had no knowledge or experience. Compared to his sister, he was just a clever brat.

No...it wasn't just Iris. No doubt many others exceeded him in talent and ability, too. He'd just refused to see them. That was the conclusion he'd come to after returning from Armelia.

It was for this reason that lately, Berne had been visiting his father to seek instruction. He knew something had to change. Nevertheless, it was frustrating. His father worked him hard, as if to make up for years of dereliction, and consistently dumped massive amounts of homework on him at the end of every session. It took Berne until the wee hours of the morning to finish it all.

Suddenly, Berne noticed Dorssen in front of the academy's entrance. His muscular body and short hair made him quite distinct.

"Good morning."

"Hey, Dorssen. Morning," Edward said.

"Good morning, Dorssen. You seem exhausted... Are you okay?" Yuri asked.

"Yes. I was just involved in some training yesterday. I'm fine."

Dorssen was usually stony, but now that Yuri mentioned it, he did seem tired. Berne would never have noticed if she hadn't pointed it out.

"I see... Well, don't push yourself too hard."

"Thank you for your concern."

Lately, Dorssen had been obligated to join the royal knights' training. It all started when Dorssen's father, Doruna, had said something about "rebuilding his character" and forced him to do so. Apparently, Duke Armelia's wife had ceased attending all parties thrown by House Kataberia—Dorssen's house. House Armelia even gave

them the cold shoulder at official events.

In simpler terms, this was the outcome of Duchess Armelia's revenge. Berne had only learned about it once he started attending his father's lessons. At the time, he'd recalled Iris's warning: *Think about the results of your actions.*

When they reached the classroom, everyone turned and greeted them. This was expected, considering the second prince and his fiancée had just arrived. They took their seats, and just as the class chime was about to ring, the door opened again.

"Morning!"

"Morning, Van."

Van Lutasha entered at the last possible second. He was the son of the pope of the Darryl Church. Because the Church of Darryl was the kingdom's official religion, his family was treated like one of the peerage. The title of "pope" had even come to be passed down from father to son, like that of a hereditary lord. For this reason, Van was able to attend the academy, which otherwise exclusively served the nobility.

"Van, you're always so late," Yuri chided. "One day you're going to get in trouble."

"Considering my history, I'm actually pretty early. More importantly, your hair's even more beautiful than ever, Ms. Yuri."

"Thank you! Although it doesn't sound like much of a compliment coming from you."

Van's hair was fluffy and blond, with a silky luster that even women who cared for their hair couldn't always manage. His soft eyes were the standout feature of his androgynous face.

"Oh, don't think like that. It really is pretty."

"Th-thanks. It must be because of the Azuta Corporation's beauty products." Yuri blushed slightly.

Van smiled with satisfaction and nodded. "Ah, Azuta."

"Yes! I finally got my membership approved, too."

"Unbelievable that a mere corporation made my fiancée wait." Edward clicked his tongue in annoyance. He'd never liked Yuri and Van getting along, though he was irritable in general.

“Prince Ed, don’t say that,” Yuri protested. “Everyone has to wait. It was only fair that I did, too.”

The second that Yuri scolded him, Edward’s expression changed. “You’re so sweet, Yuri.”

Wait, her membership was approved? Berne was secretly surprised. Given his sister’s history with the prince and Yuri, it wouldn’t have shocked him to see Yuri’s application denied outright. Still, knowing Iris, she probably put aside her feelings in favor of conceding to the royal family. Doing otherwise would be bad for business.

It must have killed the servants who love her to watch it happen, Berne thought as he gazed off into the distance.

“Azuta is so popular. Even I’m still waiting for my membership,” said Van.

“I know, right?” Yuri enthused. “The president must be an amazing person. I respect them so much. I wish I could meet them!”

“In that case, perhaps I should summon them to the palace,” said the prince. “They’ll probably trip over their own feet running over, they’ll be so honored.”

“That’s a good idea!” Yuri rejoiced, innocent to the truth of the matter.

Berne, for his part, broke out in internal sweats. *She’ll never come.*

In fact, nearly the entire Armelia family nursed a grudge against the second prince. Berne’s visit home had made that all too clear. Not only did his mother flay him with that scathing lecture, but the moment he left Iris’s side, the entire servant staff had completely ignored him. It had been like sleeping on a bed of thorns.

“Speaking of invited guests, what about that business we spoke about earlier?” asked Yuri.

“Oh, that thing about distributing food at that church?” asked the prince. “Sure, you’ve got approval. Right, Van?”

“Indeed. The Darryl Church will gladly assist in this endeavor.”

“That’s so good to hear!” said Yuri. “I hope we’ll bring relief to as many people as we can.”

“Obviously, if you’re doing it, everyone will jump for joy.”

Yuri was a very kind girl. She proposed all sorts of lavish

charitable initiatives to Prince Edward, like donating food to the poor, and the prince moved mountains to make her ideas a reality.

But do they realize the scope of these events has put a strain on the budget? Berne found himself wondering again amidst their conversation.

No one he knew ever questioned the workings of the system that supported them. The royal family never altered their lifestyle except to make it more extravagant. Queen Ellia often spent money on herself, and Prince Edward showered Yuri in gifts. Yet, the kingdom's tax revenues hadn't changed to support these expenditures.

Berne recalled a particular outburst from his father: *If that fiancée of his wants to give back to the people, then she needs to reexamine her own wealth. Those accursed lovebirds. She should sell the gifts she so enjoys from Prince Edward and use that money to hold her charity events. But no, she still begs him for more—she's taking twice as much as she gives.*

One or two charity events a year wouldn't have threatened the kingdom's coffers, but the constant stream was putting pressure on the stability of the realm. The kingdom's vassals, especially Duke Armelia, opposed these events, but the queen and second prince forced them through, and in so doing steadily depleted food stockpiles and incurred indirect labor costs. What was more, the charity events were exclusively held in the royal capital. According to Berne's father, this "aid" didn't reach the people most truly in need of it. It was, to him, just a ploy to increase the second prince's popularity.

The consequence of indirect labor costs meant the budget reserved to ensure people could continue working in various jobs had been reduced. As a result, the middle class teetered on the edge of poverty. In the past, Berne had considered Yuri an angel... But perhaps he really had been blind. Again, he recalled his sister's words:

All you ever ask is why. But fine. The more people who study here and gain knowledge, the more that knowledge will spread among our people. It might take some time, but in ten or twenty years the Armelian standard of living will surely rise. As governor, I believe it's necessary to look toward that future.

If Yuri truly cared for the people of Tasmeria, she wouldn't be spending money on random acts of "charity" but working to give them the ability to continually sustain themselves. It had taken a while, but Berne finally understood his father's and sister's words. At the same time, a wave of regret washed over his heart.

He summoned his courage and spoke. "Any more of these charitable events will put a strain on the treasury. Maybe you should consider holding back this time."

"Why would you say such a thing, Berne?" Yuri asked. Tears threatened to flow from her large eyes. "Shouldn't our priority be to help the people? This would make everyone happy, so obviously it's a good thing..."

"Charity is good, but only where it's needed. Yuri, you shouldn't be putting these infeasible ideas in Prince Edward's head—"

"He's the prince of this kingdom! A prince can do anything, can't he? If the treasury is running low, then replenish it with taxes. Oh, or disband the military? Yes, that's a splendid idea. This kingdom's so peaceful, we have no need for a military. Right, Prince Edward?" Yuri smiled at her fiancé, proud of her "perfect" proposal.

Berne couldn't hide his shock. *She's like a little kid.* As innocent as a child and as thoughtlessly cruel. Even a second of deeper thought would make one would realize disbanding the military wasn't possible. Not only did they defend the kingdom's borders, but they also kept the peace. Most of all, what of all the people who would lose their jobs? Without proper planning for alternative work, they'd be sentenced to a future of standing in line at Yuri's one-off charity events.

"You're so smart, Yuri..." The prince smiled. Then he glared at Berne. "Berne, you're too stubborn. You're reminding me of a certain vassal."

"Forgive me for stepping out of line." Berne shut his mouth. *Ugh, Father's going to blow his top again. No... Maybe he never really calmed down in the first place.*

"He's graduating already, huh?" I muttered to myself.

"Lady Iris, is something the matter?" Tanya asked.

"Mm... I was just thinking about Berne."

A lot of time had passed since I left the academy. I'd been so busy that it really didn't feel like that long ago, though. It was quite an

emotional thing to realize the people I'd known there were going to be graduating. According to the original game's summary, after a year at the academy, the protagonist got a good ending with one of the love interests. If she chose the Prince Edward route, Iris—i.e., me—ended up expelled from the academy in disgrace while they lived happily ever after, or something. You get the picture.

Of course, if the player chose no love interest, she got a neutral ending. There was no harem ending, like what was playing out in reality... At least, I thought it was. That said, I had been the type to power through games on my own without ever looking at strategy guides or walkthroughs, so I'd only ever reached the second prince's ending. I didn't know much about the others. Unfortunately, I had just regained my memories of playing the game right at the conclusion of the plot, so it wasn't like that extra knowledge helped either.

Incidentally, Berne and I had been born a year apart. However, we had been in the same grade. In other words, Prince Edward and everyone I knew would be graduating at the same time.

"My lady, do you miss the academy?" Tanya asked.

"I suppose I do have some nice memories of the place, but that's about it. My days have been so full since my expulsion that I haven't had time to reminisce."

"I see..."

"The effects of their graduation into society remain to be seen. I do hope we'll be able to separate Berne from their influence."

"There's no need for you to waste your concern on him."

Tanya, Berne is still technically the family heir... I sighed. Talk about cutting him off.

"Look, if the kingdom's not going down in flames any time soon, then the duchy is best served by maintaining a connection with the central government," I said. "Assuming nothing happens to him, my father will be the prime minister for a long time to come, but...if you consider the future, then we need to prepare for Berne following in his footsteps."

"My lady, you make it sound like the destruction of this kingdom is a genuine possibility."

"You never know what the future holds. After the second prince

graduates, I foresee an uptick in conflict, which will mean even more instability.”

Would things truly have a good end with Yuri and the second prince living happily ever after? If the conflict between the first prince and the second prince grew more heated, it threatened to bring the kingdom to its knees.

“That reminds me, you received a letter from your father,” said Tanya. “What did it say?”

“Hm? He seemed grateful. Apparently Berne has finally started coming to him for lessons. I don’t think I did anything, so he’d be better served thanking our mother for setting it all up.”

The truth was, I didn’t really care what happened to Berne. The most I thought of him was as a potentially useful pawn.

“Forgive me if I’m intruding, my lady, but that doesn’t match the look I saw on your face as you read the letter. You seemed...ill at ease.”

“Ah, well... There was also word of Prince Edward.”

That certainly had been a shock. Firstly, that Berne had actually begun reporting Prince Edward’s behavior to Father. Secondly and even more shocking, that he reported *what* Prince Edward said. Berne had objected—Berne, of all people!—to a charity event, saying it would strain the kingdom’s coffers. Then, out of the blue, they suggested we disband the military!

Father had told Grandfather about this, sending him into a rage: *There’s no wasteful spending in the military! If you want to cut something, cut the royal knights!*

The kingdom was currently at peace, there was no denying that. We hadn’t gone to war with another country since the Tweil War, the one in which Grandfather won his glory. However, no formal ceasefire had ever been agreed to. Ultimately, we were in the midst of a lull that could spark back into open conflict at any moment. The fact that this had even been brought up was concerning. Grandfather had returned to the royal capital upon the news.

“I hate that man,” Tanya whispered.

This snapped me out of my thoughts. Her expressionless face made her statement even scarier.

“Tanya, I wasn’t pining for Prince Edward, let alone depressed.

Not in that way. I was just a bit surprised by the contents of the letter.”

“But it is unthinkable that he should still cause you grief.”

“I appreciate your concern, Tanya.” I really did. “But now it’s time to get back to work.”

I finished my teatime and returned to the study. Now that Grandfather had left too, the mansion felt so big. He really filled any room he was in, didn’t he?

“Oh... Lyle, Dida. What is it?” As I was walking down the hall, I ran into them in front of the study.

“I’m here to submit my report, my lady,” said Lyle.

“I’m just bored,” said Dida.

Lyle glared at Dida. “You need to fix that mouth of yours!”

How many times have I seen this scene play out? I wondered as I sat in my chair. “It’s fine, Lyle. Now, how are things with the security force?”

“Things are going well. While Master Gazell was here, he oversaw our training every day.” Lyle was a harsh critic, too, so they really *had* to be doing well.

“Yeah, yeah. They can at least hold a candle to us now.”

“Well now, that is fantastic.” Oddly enough, Tanya offered an unsolicited compliment.

True enough, if our forces could go toe-to-toe with Lyle and Dida, then they really had improved. The last time I’d snuck a look at their training, my two guards hadn’t even let their training partners draw their swords.

Seriously, how strong were my boys? Before he left, Grandfather had told me, “Those two beat me! I must be getting old.” He seemed a bit sad about that, since he’d never lost to them before. But his eyes had also sparkled like an excited child, and I clearly remembered him having mock battles with Lyle and Dida every day until he left.

“My lady... If your forces can match these two, then they’re at

least as strong as the best royal knights or the foremost soldiers in the military.”

“That does sound fantastic. Keep up the good work.”

I appreciate it, Grandfather, I silently thanked him. However, it did beg the question of what he intended to do with our security force. But if anything *were* to befall the kingdom, a strong force capable of protecting our lands would prove invaluable.

The detached palace was situated apart from the royal palace. While not as gaudy, it was of equally sturdy construction. Closer inspection revealed a masterful attention to detail. The person who called this palace home was Queen Dowager Iria Fons Tasmeria, who valued peace and tranquility. As the queen of the previous generation, she was also the mother of the current king and the highest-ranking noblewoman in the kingdom.

“By the way, Alfred. I noticed you were going out with Rudy quite often lately.”

Her eyes were on her grandson Alfred, the first prince. By his side was Rudy, his childhood friend and assistant.

“You’re sharp, Grandmother. I’ve found myself quite busy.”

Alfred smiled as he answered, but Iria sighed internally. Though Alfred was her grandson, she found it impossible to tell what he was thinking from his expression. It was at once a tight yet *too* natural smile. Even for someone such as herself, who had lived for decades within the world of manipulation and deceit known as high society, couldn’t have read him were it not for the years she had spent raising him.



“I have my sources,” she said. “You’re helping the prime minister clean up after Ellia and Edward’s messes, aren’t you?”

The debt accumulated during the Tweil War thirty years past still haunted the kingdom of Tasmeria. They had been managing to gradually pay it back, so barring disaster, there was no real financial threat. Despite this, Queen Ellia and Prince Edward seem determined to sink the kingdom between the constant gratuitous acts of frivolous charity, Ellia’s baroque dresses for official events that she might never wear, as well as the lavish presents Prince Edward bought for his new fiancée.

Once, the prince and his fiancée had vacationed at a resort and the girl had said, “This place is so wonderful! Wouldn’t it be wondrous if everyone could enjoy it?” and in his zealous urge to please, Edward had tried to fully recreate the resort in the capital. If he’d meant it as a joke, no one was laughing.

Thankfully, the prime minister Duke Armelia had staunchly opposed this project and shut it down. This enraged Edward, and he became entirely unreasonable until the commission of Yuri’s dresses was grudgingly approved. But paying for her dresses out of the royal family’s coffers was unheard of. In Iria’s opinion, Ellia and her coddled son were becoming too arrogant for their own good.

The kingdom’s budget was split between the royal family’s and the government’s funds. The royal family’s funds were meant to support their lives and private activities. The government’s funds were, as one might expect, used to run the kingdom.

For example, in the case of the queen dowager, her everyday wardrobe was paid for out of the royal family’s funds, while the dresses she wore at official events were considered necessary expenses for the government and covered by the related funds.

Furthermore, she paid her servants out of her own pocket—in other words, from the royal family budget. However, the officials that served her as the queen dowager were paid by the government’s funds. The difference was incredibly difficult to tell, but basically it came down to whether they served Iria in her private life or were clerks to one of the kingdom’s top officials, the queen dowager. Her handmaids were the former, and officials were the latter. Custom might also dictate where an individual’s salary originated, but this was the general rule.

However, whatever custom might be, Yuri was still only a royal fiancée. There was no precedent for spending either the royal family's funds or the government's funds on her daily activities.

"Yes, they've been making a right mess of things financially, and within the palace as well," said Alfred, calm as could be. "Especially the queen's family and their people. Thanks to them, anyone of merit has been chased off, hence our current straits."

"And our once-reliable king. Not only did he lose all vigor after your dear mother Sharia passed, now he's taken ill." Iria sighed. "Fortunately, the news of the king's infirmity hasn't yet leaked to the outside world, but it's only a matter of time."

"Indeed." Alfred smiled softly. "It's with this understanding that the queen's family is gathering influence."

"Alfred," Iria said sharply, warningly.

"Yes, I know. I'm not planning to die just yet. I will stay behind the curtain a while longer."

"As long as you understand," she said sternly.

"Until our final preparations are in place, I will continue to operate in secret," he promised.

"You mean by gathering allies and preparing to excise the corruption."

"I can't hide anything from you, Grandmother."

Alfred confirmed nothing, but his answer satisfied Iria. She could trust he would get the job done. "Oh? But what of your secret adventures with Rudy?" she asked. "Leticia misses you greatly. Can't you share anything about what you're up to?"

Leticia was Alfred's sister. She was younger than Edward but wise beyond her years. The queen dowager had high hopes for her, similar to those she had for Alfred.

"Perhaps one day." Alfred smiled mysteriously again. He didn't plan on divulging any more.

Iria allowed him to have this secret, at least for now.

“Hee hee...”

Alone in her tearoom, Iria reflected on her conversation with Alfred. It made her so happy that she couldn't hide her smile. Despite Alfred's reticence, she had a keen understanding of where he was spending his time. He visited many places across the kingdom but often returned to the duchy of Armelia. This, fortunately, aligned with Iria's goal: to wed the duke's daughter to a member of the royal family.

It all stemmed from her love of Iris's mother, Merellis. The moment Iria first set eyes on that woman's lovely, doll-like face, she had wished Merellis was her own daughter. However, Merellis had at the time already been engaged to the previous duke's eldest son, Louis. She'd loved him since she was just a girl, and so Iria had cried but gave up on her dream. The last thing she wanted to do was force the issue and lead Merellis to hate her.

She didn't completely give up, however. If Merellis gave birth to a daughter, Iria knew she had to get her engaged to one of her grandsons, no matter what. She later heard from Louis, Duke of Armelia, that they had been given the gift of a daughter—the girl Iria had hoped for. They had named the child Iris, a combination of Iria and Merellis.

Iria worried that she might have gotten ahead of herself, as she hadn't even seen the girl's face yet, but the day Merellis brought the young Iris to see her, she fell in love all over again. The child was the spitting image of Merellis, save for the deep blue eyes she'd inherited from Louis, but these lent a certain grace to her features.

Iria had to have her for a granddaughter. Politically speaking, it would be better to have the girl marry Alfred over Edward, Ellia's son. Unfortunately, with the passing of Alfred's mother, Sharia, Alfred and Leticia had become embroiled in a number of hardships, and while Iria was distracted ensuring their safety, Iris had become engaged to Edward.

Iria had once roundaboutly asked Iris if she wished to join the royal family, but she had never specified by what means. She'd been sure that even if she said nothing, Merellis would never approve of Iris's engagement to Edward, the son of a woman Merellis despised. But that belief was turned on its head when Iris fell for Edward. Iris's doting parents had assented to the union, determined to let the girl do as she wanted. In the end, it had meant Iris would become Iria's

granddaughter, which was her ultimate ambition, so she had reluctantly accepted it as well.

Then the engagement was broken.

When she heard the news, Iria despaired that her plans had once again failed. But, upon re-examination, it proved an excellent opportunity. This time, she would ensure Alfred and Iris married, and she would have that lovely girl for her granddaughter.

They said history repeated itself. Well, she wasn't about to let that happen. Iria swore that no matter what, she would succeed this time.

And so, she began to make her moves. First on her agenda was returning Iris to high society. Even if Iria's dream did come true, if Iris remained an outcast, there would be trouble ahead.

Iris hadn't shown her face once in high society since her expulsion from the academy. If she tried, she would be laughed out over her broken engagement. Now, however, she was the successful governor of a duchy and president of a popular corporation. If anything, it highlighted Edward's failure in letting her go. All that was left was to create an opportunity for Iris to return to the social season.

Perhaps it's time to get off my rear, the queen dowager thought as she raised her tired hips from her seat.

"And they lived happily ever after. The end. That's it for today's story."

I closed the book. The crowd of children looked at me with sad eyes.

"Nooo, more! More!"

"Read this picture book next!"

Aw, so cute! In the corner of my mind, I thought, *I must have the goofiest grin on my face right now*. I did my best to suppress the urge to read them another book. "I'm sorry, but I really do have to get going now. I promise I'll be back, so forgive me."

"Awww..."

“When will you be back?”

The sad voices of the children made me want to stay forever. “I’m not sure when, but I promise. Okay?”

“Okayyy...”

“Read us another book next time, too!”

“Of course.”

I bid farewell to the orphans and Mina, then took my leave.

Ugh, I didn’t want to go home. If I ever retired, perhaps I’d work at the orphanage.

Lately, I had been giving such ideas serious thought. After having my engagement to the royal family broken, marriage was not something I could realistically hope for. The dream of marital bliss lay in pieces within me.

One day, I would have to retire from my corporation and governance. When that time came, I wanted to spend my life living quietly, surrounded by children. That would be my ideal. Children really were good for the soul. I had zero experience raising them, so I was sure it would be difficult. But at the very least, with them, I was sure my heart wouldn’t feel as cold as it did now.

Discrepant interests, negotiations... Such difficulties came with business and politics. Exchanges with the kingdom and other territories took most of my mental energy. I was no saint, but I didn’t want to fail to protect what was important to me because I faltered. Sometimes, that meant turning my heart to stone and cutting off what needed to be cut off, or using who needed to be used. I had to protect my duchy, my citizens, my dear parents, and all the people who so graciously worked for me.

It made me tired. Not in body, but in mind. I think it was written in some book: *Lonely is the head that wears the crown*. I wasn’t a ruler on that level, but I had the final say in decisions that changed the fates of countless people. Whatever my title, the responsibility still lay with me.

At times, the weight threatened to crush me. But I had taken on this burden, so I had to succeed.

One day, however, I would grow old. I couldn’t keep this up forever. I’d have to find a suitable replacement. And when that time came, I’d live a quiet life surrounded by children...

I was getting ahead of myself. But that was just more reason to work hard now, so I could have the peaceful future of which I dreamed.

It had been half a year since my grandfather left the duchy of Armelia. Berne and the second prince graduated without issue, and Berne was studying under my father to learn his duties. The prince's other sycophants had also returned to their families to learn their trades. I heard even Prince Edward was learning his duties within the palace. He and Yuri weren't yet officially married. There had been no announcement of when it would happen, but it would surely be soon.

One day, I returned home and headed for my study. First, I glanced over the reports from my corporation and then turned my attention to government issues.

"Welcome, Lady Iris."

Just then, Dean entered. Ever since I'd collapsed, I'd stopped inviting Dean on my trips into the city even when there was a lull at work. I made sure our days off didn't coincide, so that no matter what happened, one of us was around to handle things.

Okay, that was an excuse. The truth was, I had been distancing my heart from Dean.

"Hello, Dean. Let's hear your report, then," I said cordially.

"Of course. As expected, with the lowered tariffs, exports and imports have increased. Profit is up across the board for all companies."

In the past six months, we had lowered tariffs and replaced the poll tax with an income tax. The introduction period had been quite chaotic, but as we went, we revised and fixed various issues.

Being a long, thin stretch of territory, the duchy of Armelia enjoyed a multitude of rich port towns on its eastern seaboard. There were other kingdoms across the sea and on our borders, which was a risk in times of war, but for now, our profits exceeded any risk. Plus, being southeast of the royal capital meant they stood between us and hostile Tweil. Compared to that threat, what we faced was nothing.

In any case, thanks to our lowered tariffs, trade with foreign

kingdoms was booming. Previously, goods had been taxed going in and out of the duchy, as well as between local towns. We had done away with the export tariff and lowered the rate at which we taxed imports. In the future, I planned to adjust the rates depending on world events and the type of goods.

At present, businesses had increased the variety of products they handled and were consequently seeing higher profits, which made me excited for the business income tax to be introduced, which differed from the personal income tax. The Azuta Corporation had also begun selling to other kingdoms, and we were gradually building up our catalog.

Furthermore, with the increase in the flow of goods had come an interesting discovery: silk.

In my old world, I believe it was in the age of Rome that silk entered Europe and became a highly sought-after luxury good. But for some reason, silk still hadn't come to Tasmeria. The material imports were mostly hemp, hides, and cotton. When I one day mused on the fact that, for us, cotton had preceded silk, I started to wonder if silk simply couldn't be produced in this world.

However, once trade expanded, I finally got my hands on it. One day, I hoped to produce it locally using silkworms. Although, even if I knew the origin of silk, I honestly had no idea *how* it was turned into cloth. It would probably take a long time to figure out. For that reason, when tax revenue stabilized, I wanted to offer the patronage of the duchy to anyone willing to conduct a thorough battery of experiments to learn the secrets of silk.

I heard a knock, and in came Sebastian. "Pardon me, Lady Iris."

"What is it?"

"I have a delivery for you."

I looked at the letter he handed me, and my eyes went wide. The crest on the seal was that of the royal family. I opened it and quickly got to reading.

"Why was this sent to me...?"

It was an invitation to the palace for a party celebrating the kingdom's foundation. This was an official event, so normally, every noble who could physically make it would be in attendance. Keyword:

normally. I, however, had not only been expelled from high society, I hadn't once attended—let alone been invited to—a single event since leaving the academy. That was to be expected, and it made this sudden invitation all the stranger.

“If I may, Lady Iris... This is an invitation from the royal family. It is not possible to turn it down without extraordinary cause.” Sebastian eyed the invitation with a similar level of suspicion.

“Right... I suppose I'll have to prepare myself for the worst.”

“Do not worry about the duchy. Dean is here, and if anything untoward should occur, I'll be sure to send a messenger.”

I steeled myself. “Good. Thank you, Sebastian.”

A few days later, I left the duchy and headed for my family's mansion in the capital. I hadn't been here in three years, so the experience was overwhelming.

“Welcome back, Lady Iris.”

Every servant was at the door to greet me. Leading them was the head maid, Elulu.

“It's good to see you again, Elulu,” I said.

“Yes. For me, there could be no greater joy.”

“You're so dramatic.”

I walked past the rows of servants and headed for the salon. There, my parents and brother awaited me.

“There you are,” said Father as I entered.

“Welcome home, Iris, dear,” said Mother.

“It's been too long, Father, Mother, Berne.”

“You seem healthy, at least. Be sure to relax while you're here.” My normally strict father looked at me with a soft expression. That alone was enough to light a spark of happiness in me.

“I will gratefully take you up on your offer,” I said, taking a seat.

“Dear, I heard from Sei that you have a new product,” said Mother. “I can't wait to see it.”

“It's not available to be sold yet,” I demurred. “However, I'll be showing off a test version at the next party. Please look forward to it.”

“Oooh! Can’t you show it to me later in secret? Please?”

“Let’s save some excitement for tomorrow,” I said. She agreed to wait, if somewhat sadly.

“Iris...are you really attending the party tomorrow?” Berne asked during a lull in my exchange with Mother. He almost looked worried.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked sincerely. “It was an invitation from the royal family.”

“But Prince Edward and Ms. Yuri will be there.”

I was taken aback by his statement, and an awkward silence fell. “What a surprise...” I said.

Berne looked at me curiously. “What is?”

“You actually sound worried about me.”

His expression darkened a bit. “Well, I realize it’s too late to claim I care, but...”

“It’s all right. Thank you.”

After the family reunion, I relaxed in my room. The last time I was there, I had been terribly nervous as I waited to negotiate with my father. I had also been so incredibly busy preparing for what would happen afterward that I didn’t remember this room much. Perhaps that just made it more nostalgic.

As I sat there, Elulu entered. “Lady Iris, the Master is calling for you.”

“My father, huh? I’ll be right there.”

I went to his room to find him sitting in a chair, surrounded by documents. It reminded me of myself.

“There you are,” he said.

“Yes, pardon the intrusion.”

“So, I hear you’re doing well as governor.”

“I’m glad someone thinks so.”

“Don’t downplay your work,” he chided. “Anyway, I really must

apologize about this.”

“‘This’ being the party?” I asked lightly.

“Yes. Merry and I tried looking into it, but those who oversee the royal family’s activities and official events insist it’s an honest invitation.”

“What could they be planning, inviting me?” I asked. “There can’t possibly be any advantage for them.”

“No, it will just be hell for you,” he said frankly. “The nobility are wretched toward those who have been singled out for ostracization.”

“Well, I’m prepared for that,” I said, and I meant it. “Since I can’t run away, there’s no use in crying.”

Father nodded. “Fortunately, the confusion surrounding the king’s absence might provide a bit of a distraction.”

I frowned. “The king isn’t attending the Foundation Day celebration? Is something wrong?”

This was a celebration central to the soul of Tasmeria. Only the gravest of conditions could possibly prevent him from attending.

“Six months ago, His Majesty collapsed.”

“No...”

The solemn news made me gasp. The king would be absent at the worst possible time. The chaos brewing in the kingdom was now bound to worsen.

“At the time, his condition wasn’t critical. But at present, it’s worsened to the point that anyone could tell from a glance that he is sick. I suspect his absence at tomorrow’s celebration will alert the entire kingdom.”

That was to be expected. News of the king’s absence would spread like wildfire.

“I suppose you’re right, then. The word on everyone’s lips will be of His Majesty’s absence, not some duke’s daughter. If I can survive tomorrow, my existence will recede once more into the back of their memories. I will promptly return to the duchy and trouble them no more.”

“Yes, indeed...”

“Though, Father, I’m sure your life will be even more stressful after the party. Try to take care of yourself,” I said.

“Same to you,” he said, harrumphing. “I heard you collapsed once already.”

“It was just one day. Since then, I’ve incorporated breaks into my routine.”

“I see. The body is the capital necessary for work. Let’s both try not to abuse our most vital resource.”

“Yes. Thank you for your concern.”

The next day brought perfect weather, so I took my usual yoga routine into the garden. Tanya seemed to have given up on chiding me for doing yoga in a hemp top and pants, but it seemed she never guessed I would do it outside. When she found me, she was in a right panic.

I’m sorry, Tanya. But good weather is so rare in the capital that I just had to!

Just then, Mother also found me and expressed interest in my routine, so I promised to teach her the next morning. The celebration would take up all our time for the rest of the day, so I needed to start getting ready.

I promptly showered and began my preparations. Tanya helped me into my dress, put on my makeup, and did my hair. Incidentally, the test product I mentioned the day before was the dress I intended to wear. I’d had it constructed from the silk I found. Ah, silk... It had a lovely luster.

“You look so beautiful, my lady...”

Tanya, too, was taken in by the dress, and she murmured under her breath.

All right, my armor was fitted. My mind was steeled. It was time to head to the battlefield.

Afterword

NICE TO MEET YOU. I'm Reia. Thank you so much for picking up this book. I originally posted this book to *Let's Be Novelists*; it was then edited and revised for print.

The heart of this book is the working woman. A woman giving her all for something is wonderful, isn't it? Then I combined it with a variety of my favorite situations and settings.

Speaking of web novels, I absolutely love all kinds of novels. As I wrote in my profile, as a kid, when I got hooked on a book, I'd forget to even eat or sleep. When summer vacation ended and I went back to school, people often said, "You look ghostly pale rather than just pale. Everything okay?" With my biorhythm destroyed, it became a yearly thing for me to battle with exhaustion and sunlight on my first day of school.

Even now, the piles of books I've collected threaten to overwhelm my room. The other day, as I was sleepily lying in bed thinking, "It's really late. I should sleep," a truck passed by the street in front of my place, causing a slight tremor. "That was a big noise," I thought, but I put it out of my mind and went to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, I discovered a cruel sight; the pile of books I couldn't fit into my bookcase had collapsed. However, I was busy that morning, so I pretended I didn't see it and left the room to get ready to go. That's when I realized the truth: the pile of books was preventing the door from opening.

"Isn't that obvious?" you might say. But my pile of books wasn't *that* high, so I thought I could just jump over it. So I did, and when I put my hand on the door, I remembered: it swung in. So, with tears in my eyes, I was forced to spend my morning moving my books. Thankfully, it was just a truck that time, but if I had been in my room during an earthquake, I might not have been able to evacuate. I realized I had to do something quick... But here I am, still collecting books.

It was ten years ago that I first met web novels. They were super popular back then, and once I read one, I too was hooked. I ran out my phone battery reading, and I was always worried I would lose power.

Because the novel wasn't finished, I enjoyed imagining continuations in my head. As a result, I started to think, "I want to read *this* kind of novel," and tried writing one. That's how I started writing this series.

I never imagined back then that I'd get an offer to publish a paper version and that the day would come when I'd write a book. Even today, I still think I'm dreaming.

To my friend, M, thank you for giving me the push I needed when I was struggling. Thank you so much as well to my friends and family who supported me.

But most of all, thanks to everyone who read and supported my internet novel, I was able to publish a physical version. Allow me to use this space to express my profuse thanks.

Also, to my editor, K: Thank you so much for reaching out to me and continuing to offer support.

Haduki Futaba, thank you for your wonderful illustrations. They're so good that I can't stop feeling excited about them. I put one in a frame and hung it up so I could look at it with a stupid grin on my face.

Last, but not least, my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who picked up and read this book. Thank you ever so much.

—REIA



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